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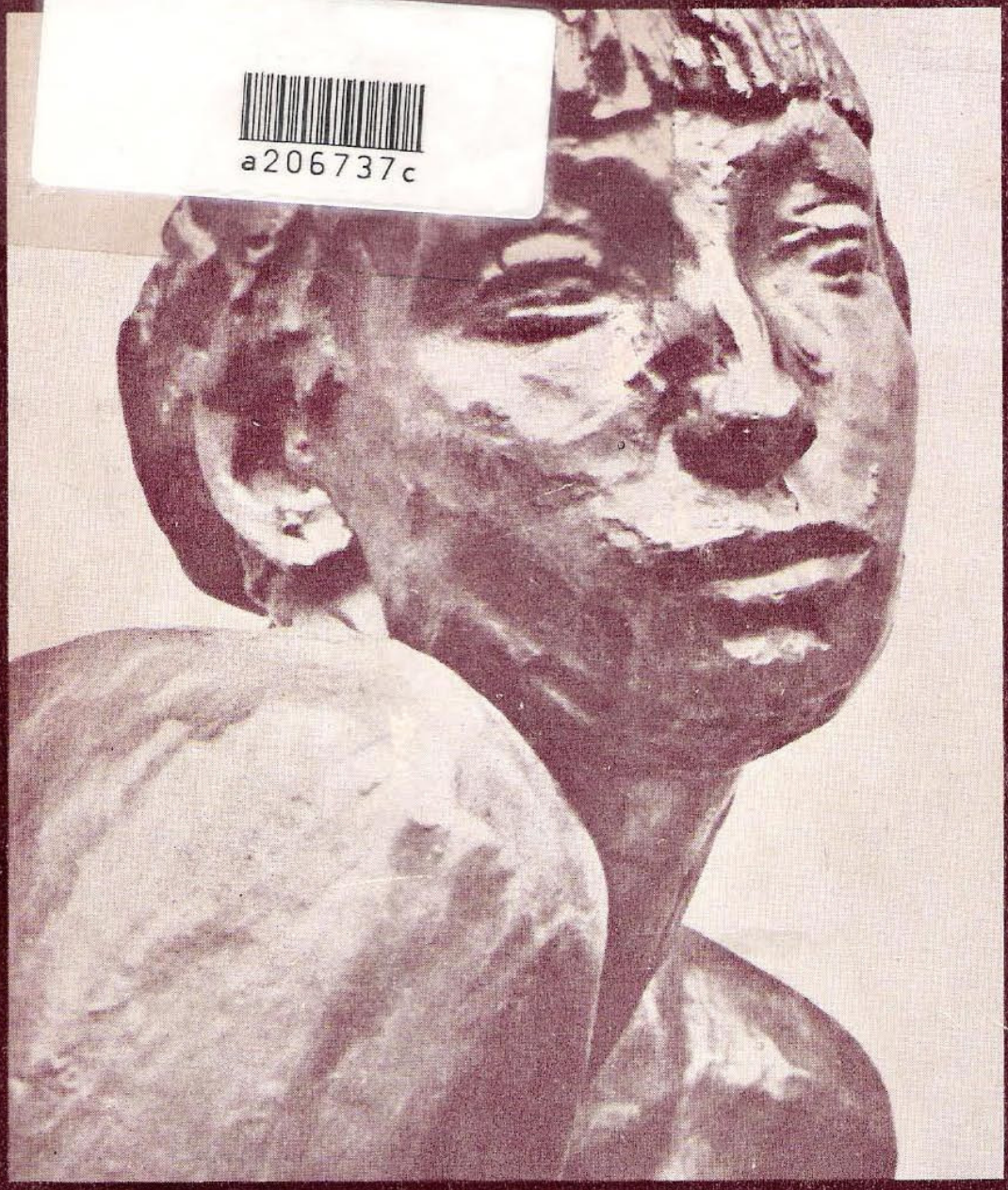

by Jan-Albert Goris

Belgian Government Information Center

Modern Sculpture in Belgium

Johannes Albertus

by Jan-Albert Goris (Marnix Gijsen, pseud.)

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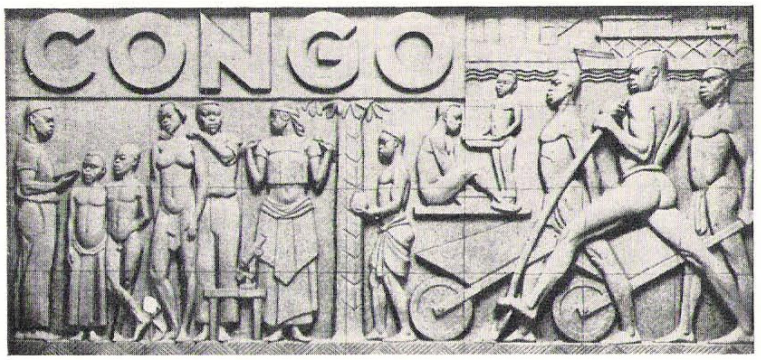
His publications in English are: *Belgium in Bondage* (New York, 1943), *Strangers Should Not Whisper* (New York, 1945), *Belgium* (University of California Press, 2nd edition, 1947), *Belgian Letters* (New York, 1946), *The Growth of the Belgian Nation* (New York, 1946), *Rubens in America*, with Julius S. Held (New York, 1947).



Bas-relief in baked panels by A. Dupagne, Richmond, Va.

THE only Belgian sculptor well represented in American galleries and known at least to the cognoscenti is *Constantin Meunier.* Besides its plastic qualities, his art had a social significance which undoubtedly appealed to the American public. But since Meunier, who belongs to the 19th century, Belgian sculpture has evolved. Through the work of Baron *Georges Minne* it has again influenced European sculptors, especially in Germany, to an extent that is unfortunately not known in the United States. Among the living Belgian sculptors, only *Ernest Wijnants* and *Oscar Jespers* are represented in American public collections.

This brief survey of Belgian sculpture since 1830 is intended to introduce some of Belgium's modern sculptors whose work is esteemed very highly by their countrymen and by European art circles in general. The lack of appreciation of their work in America has been due mainly to the difficulty of contacts and to the relative exiguity of Belgium, which is not always in a position to present its case to the world with the means at the disposal of larger countries.

Dinanderie

Traditionally, the Belgians have a high regard for sculpture. They ornament their houses with the works of their countrymen, and the state and the municipal governments are always ready to engage artists for the decoration of public buildings. Furthermore, in both parts of the country old traditions of sculptural handicraft persist: in the Walloon country, especially in Dinant, the art of copperhammering which once flourished and achieved real artistic value, lives on on a modest scale. In recent years the Government has made efforts to revive it: several important decorative works have been executed in "dinanderie" on government commissions. In Flanders, the Mechlin furniture industry has for many decades kept the public's interest in sculpture alive. It would be exaggerated to consider the Renaissance motifs as reproduced on the cupboards and chests of drawers fabricated in Mechlin as works of creative art. They do not have that pretension and they do not pose as such. They reproduce and adapt motifs of the 16th and 17th centuries. Still, the fact remains that hundreds of artisans continue to sculpt, in the real, original sense of the word: they do not model, they carve. They extract the figures from the material. This handicraft requires a great deal of technical knowledge and skill, but it remains a purely decorative art. The Mechlin furniture manufacturers play no role in Belgian art: in art circles they are considered as frankly reactionary. Still from time to time one of their craftsmen breaks away from the formal, industrial tradition of the trade and becomes an artist in his own right.

Mechlin furniture

In general feeling, the Belgians do not separate sculpture from architecture. They do not think that it should be architecture's hand-maiden, but they could scarcely conceive a public building, secular or religious, whose front and other main points would not be ornamented with the work of their artists. The numerous international exhibitions organized in Belgium usually give occasion to the established masters as well as to the younger talents to display their skill, through important commissions. Belgian homes are seldom without a few good pieces of sculpture, and the luxury of having one's bust made in bronze or in marble is not the privilege of millionaires or presidents of big concerns: every respectable citizen has the chance to be immortalized. The Belgians have carefully taken note of what the French poet said: "Le buste survit à la cité." — The bust survives the city.

Thus the atmosphere in Belgium is propitious to the appreciation of the art of sculpture. During the 19th century the economic prosperity of the country was so great that the arts immediately profited by it. Furthermore, there was a long and honored tradition of sculptural activity in Belgium. The following remarks will try to explain this tradition and will serve as an introduction to the discussion of modern Belgian sculpture which is largely a *terra incognita* to the American public.

* * *

Reredoses and Altarpieces

Although Gothic sculpture in the Belgian provinces never equalled the magnificence of the French statuary in the Middle Ages, it left several outstanding masterpieces in the interior and exterior decorations of cathedrals and of civic buildings. During the latter part of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the modern epoch — that is, in the 15th and 16th centuries — the sculpture of altarpieces in Flanders and Wallonia developed to such an extent that it became one of Belgium's chief arts and industries: the artists first used repoussé gold or silver or sometimes alabaster, but later on they employed only wood, which they colored. These reredoses and altarpieces are as a rule very elaborate works, sometimes combining painting with sculpture; literally hundreds of small-sized figurines crowd the three or five panels which usually compose the altarpiece. Probably nowhere in Western Europe have there been so many sculptors as in Belgium between 1400 and 1600. They worked not only for local consumption, but they exported their works all over Europe; practically no ship left the great port of Antwerp for foreign parts without one or more of these altarpieces

among its cargo. At present they adorn the museums and churches of France, Germany, Holland, England, the Scandinavian countries, Portugal and Spain. Through the Iberian peninsula some have even found their way to the New World.

The Breakers of Images

Although the southern provinces of the Lowlands (present-day Belgium) remained Catholic in the end, they suffered heavily from the attack the Reformation made on the anthropomorphic representation of the Deity and on religious imagery in general. In 1566 the Calvinist and Lutheran elements in the Low Countries launched a campaign of violence against religious imagery. For months they ransacked the churches and convents, destroying the "heathen images"; considerable damage was done in Belgium to its most valuable art treasures. But these Iconoclasts, these breakers of images, did not succeed in uprooting from the minds of the people their natural fondness for sculptural ornamentation. When Spain had succeeded in reaffirming its authority in Belgium and re-established the Catholic faith, sculptural decoration was used as a didactic means by the Church. A happy compromise was found between the stern unworldliness of the Church's teachings and the enthusiasm humanist artists like Rubens and his followers felt for classical sculpture.

Renaissance and Barocco

The damage done by the Iconoclasts was brilliantly repaired, not by replacing the Gothic sculptures by weak imitations in the same style, but by sculptures entirely inspired by the Renaissance and the Baroque. Instead of the hieratic figures of the Middle Ages whose contours nearly always fell within the scope of a column, the new sculpture followed the eloquent, gesturing, ardent style of Giovanni L. Bernini. The saints as represented in the sculpture of the 17th century are powerfully and actively alive, making ample gestures, nobly naked or enveloped in supple and full draperies. Entire families of sculptors were mobilized to ornament the churches: two Dutchmen, *Jan* and *Robert de Nole*, worked in Flemish towns. Another more gifted family of sculptors were the *Quellins*. *Artus Quellinus* and *Artus Quellinus the Younger* (1625-1700) both worked in Belgium and in Holland. A third important family of sculptors were the *Du Quesnoys*: *Jérôme* (-1641), *François* (1594-1642) who went to Rome, and *Jérôme the Younger* (1602-1654). Other important figures were *Jean Delcour* (1627-1707), and *Lucas Fayd'herbe* (1617-1647). One should add to this brief list *Giovanni da Bologna* (1524-1608) who although born in Flanders did all his work in Italy, and several others who became brilliant expatriates.

In the 18th century, *Théodore Verhaegen* (1653-1726) continued the baroque tradition with only slight modifications which the taste of the time demanded. The work of his contemporaries is devoted mainly to religious subjects: they decorated biers and altars, mausoleums, confessionals and pulpits with an overabundance of ornaments and realistic and symbolic motifs. This art was exceedingly declamatory and unrestrained, in fact theatrical and swollen; however, every one of the carvings of these masters is a bravura piece. They prove the technical skill and imagination of their sculptors far more than they do the depth of their sentiment.

Of greater significance were *Laurent Delvaux* (1695-1778) and *P. Verschaeffelt* (1710-1793). The former, strongly influenced by the Italian school, profusely decorated a number of buildings in Brussels, succeeding at times in achieving a charming personal style. Verschaeffelt has also left some significant works.

Classicism and Neo-Classicism

In the middle of the 18th century a reaction set in against this unbridled plastic lyricism. A return to classicism developed under the impetus of the archeological discoveries in Italy. *Lambert Godecharle* (1750-1835) prepared the way for a more restrained and static art: some of his statues are of delicate and refined sentiment, but even his contemporaries felt that his personality, however graceful, lacked vigor. Moreover, he shamelessly copied statues by foreign masters, his most famous plagiarism being that of Houdon's "La Frileuse."

Mathieu Kessels (1784-1836) was also a neo-classicist. As a collaborator of Thorwaldsen, he had an international career and a European reputation, and most of his work was done outside of Belgium. He died on the eve of his return to his fatherland. In his time, his monument of the Countess of Selle in Rome was considered a masterpiece.

Several other artists of Belgian origin spread out in Europe and acquired great fame, such as *Joseph Ruxthiel* (1775-) in France and *Jean Robert Calloigne* (1775-1830) in Holland, while *François Rude*, a French exile, exercised a happy influence in Belgium from 1815 to 1827.

Revival in the 19th Century

During the 19th century Belgian sculpture strongly felt the influence of foreign artistic currents: starting out with the neo-classical credo, it became romantic, then naturalistic, and finally symbolic, although no clear-cut division between these periods can be traced. Several tendencies existed at the same time. It cannot be said that the history of Belgian sculpture in that century recorded great heights except for *Meunier* who definitely introduced not only new motifs in sculpture, but succeeded in treating them in a very forceful and personal style. But still there were a great number of good craftsmen whose best works honor Belgian art.

Geefs

As in all other fields of artistic endeavor, the independence of Belgium, proclaimed in 1830, brought an extraordinary impulse to sculpture. A country that has recovered its autonomy after centuries of foreign rule has a tendency to artistic self-assertion. Belgium was no exception to that rule. Besides, the artistic credo of the time was romanticism, which implied the exaltation of the heroic personalities of the distant and the recent past. *Guillaume Geefs* (1805-1883) and his six brothers endowed Belgium with a real pantheon. In 1836 he produced his masterpiece, the statue of General Belliard, by far the best piece of statuary that exists in Belgium. Considering the fact that practically no open space in a Belgian city remains long unadorned with the image of a local great man, this is no faint praise. Belliard's statue in Brussels is a model of artistic restraint and nobility. It achieves its effect of serenity and courage with a minimum of technical means. The tomb of Count Frédéric de Mérode in the Ste. Gudula cathedral in Brussels was done in a style that combined realism and romanticism, close to the style of the "gisants" of the 17th and the 18th centuries. Geefs, who enjoyed an enormous success, found in it his undoing. The new kingdom kept him and his phalanx of brothers busy with commissions: he portrayed André Grétry in Liége, Peter-Paul Rubens in Antwerp (one of his less successful ventures). He made excellent decorative symbolic figures for the Column of Congress in Brussels and produced tombs, pulpits, statues and busts in extraordinary quantity. There is nothing effete or sentimental about his productions. Every one of his works shows the excellent craftsmanship, the remarkable technique that never knew a flaw: but most of his art is academic and cool. He gave to his models a conventional greatness, an indisputable dignity which never turned into solemnity or boredom, but sacrificed deeper sentiment and true feeling. In the "Amorous Lion," he came close to the cool perfection of the lesser works of Canova.

For nearly thirty years (from 1836 to 1860), the Geefs brothers dominated sculpture in Belgium. Next to Guillaume, the oldest of the tribe, *Joseph Geefs* (1808-1885), was the most prolific and undoubtedly the most gifted.

Italian Influence

The young Belgian sculptors of the 19th century were convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that sculpture could only be studied in Italy. That was a belief almost universally accepted throughout the world in those times. It would be foolish to contradict it: the lessons Greek and Roman sculptures as well as Italian Renaissance sculpture can give to a sculptor are not to be ignored at any time, but for many a young artist the teachings of Rome and northern Italy proved too strong. They blinded them to the possibility of a more personal art; they subdued their sensibility by tempting them to imitate rather than to create. The fact is that between the début of Guillaume Geefs and 1860 very few good sculptors came to the fore: a small number of them continued the tradition of honest craftsmanship and skilled technique, but inspiration was lacking and their inner feelings remained unexpressed. *Louis Eugène Simonis* (1810-1882) made a statue of the medieval crusader, Godfrey of Bouillon, the first Christian ruler of Jerusalem: it is an equestrian piece, full of declamatory energy. Its romantic allure conceals its real qualities, but it is well adapted to the elegant square in Brussels where it stands. The same can be said of the van Artevelde monument of *Pierre de Vigne* (1812-1877) in Ghent and of the tomb of Queen Marie Louise in Ostend by *Charles Fraikin* (1817-1893), a pharmacist who turned to sculpture after seeing the statue of Belliard by Geefs.

Florentine Realists

When these sculptors had achieved a relative fame on the basis of their primarily romantic and neo-classical art, a reaction set in inspired by a more intimate knowledge of the realism of the Florentine sculptors. In the beginning only the subject matter of the statuary changed and there was but little change in the treatment of materials, but by slow degrees Belgian sculpture managed to liberate itself from the bonds of frigid academicism.

In this action of liberation several minor talents had a role. *Ferdinand Fassin* (1828-1900) produced a graceful, natural statue of a Neapolitan watercarrier, a work of enduring charm and value. *Paul de Vigne* (1843-1901), the son of Pierre, had an even more brilliant career. His *Immortalité* which may seem conventional in its pose had an immense success, but his most impressive work is the group that decorates the façade of the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, a truly monumental bronze ensemble of great style and lyrical inspiration: "The Glorification of Art."

Van der Stappen

His contemporary *Charles van der Stappen* (1843-1910) had a far greater influence on Belgian sculpture, not so much through his own production as through his teachings. He lacked personality and inspiration, but he was an intelligent master who discovered and encouraged the gifts of several remarkable pupils — Minne, Rousseau, Lagae and others. Whenever he succeeded in expressing himself fully, he resorted to literary motifs: his best work is "La Mort d'Ompdrailles", a picturization of the main incident of a poem by Léon Claudel, "Le Tombeau des Lutteurs." Being easily subject to influences, van der Stappen started out as a follower of the Tuscan sculptors of the Quattrocento, and ended up as an imitator of Constantin Meunier.

Vinçotte

Two other artists of real talent reinforced the brigade of the Italianists, the graceful *Julien Dillens* (1849-1904) and *Thomas Vinçotte* (1850-1925). Dillens was not a very strong artistic personality, and even his best known and most impressive work, the "Figure for a Tomb," comes very close to an Italian sculpture (of Lorenzo Bartolini). Vinçotte was a much more arresting figure; his work does not date at all, he had no mannerisms, he was spontaneously monumental and heroic. His busts and his statues of official personages present a high degree of resemblance, but at the same time assume proportions of nobility and solemnity which give them an exceptional grandeur. His last work, the equestrian statue of *Léopold II*, is a complete success. The powerful animal groups and monuments of *Jacques de Lalaing* (1858-1917) are akin to Vinçotte's work, but they are even more vigorous. *Jules Lagae* (1862-1931), a pupil of van der Stappen, devoted himself to the portrayal of the intimate happiness of family life under the very perceptible influence of Donatello. Among his best works are *Mother and Child* and several excellent portraits of writers and painters.

Belgian sculpture became realistic and naturalistic under the influence of an artist who was known as a good painter. When he discovered that the gestures and attitudes of the modern worker have a greatness of their own, he decided to glorify them. By doing this he liberated the plastic art of Belgium from conventionalism and showed European sculpture a new road.

Meunier

Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), who once wrote that all he proposed to claim at his life's close was "the well-fitted career of a good workman and a record of artistic honesty," began his brilliant career in the atelier of Fraikin as fire-tender, model-moistener and occasional modeler. He soon turned to painting in which he became successful, doing at the same time all kinds of odd jobs to keep the wolf from the door of his numerous household. About 1880 he discovered the coal-mining region of southern Belgium and became conscious of its somber beauty. A little later, the dockers of the Antwerp port struck him by their noble, easy gestures and attitudes.

From that time on, Meunier opened a new road: he returned to sculpture and created a proletarian art. Renouncing the subjects of the neo-classical schools, the nymphs and naiads, carefully avoiding official statuary, busts of kings and the mighty, he devoted himself entirely to the portrayal of the workers of the mines, the docks and the fields.

His contemporaries used to compare him to Rodin. They divided the honors of sculpture in his time equally between Meunier and the French master. They felt, however, that Rodin was superior in the interpretation of physical beauty and of psychic unrest while acknowledging that Meunier had no rival "in his chosen province of labour and his interpretation of the noble dignity of toil."

It is indeed Meunier's greatest merit to have rendered to the worker of his day the stature and the greatness he had always had, but that had been long overlooked. He rediscovered the beauty of the laborer, of the longshoreman, of the industrial worker, of the farmer sowing seed upon his land, of the girls dressed in blue-jeans pushing little coal wagons in the mines. He took rhetoric out of sculpture, although critics now sometimes pretend that he created a proletarian rhetoric of his own. To a certain extent this may be true, because he purposely avoided vulgarity and dramatization in his way of representing the working man: he wanted to see only

the nobility of the gestures and attitudes of the laborer. There is, however, no sentimental weakness in his art: he does not weep about the laborer's fate. On the contrary, he exalts his subjects and gives them a dignity they never before attained in sculpture. His longshoremen, his miners have a Whitmanesque grandeur. If there is a kind of proletarian rhetoric in Meunier, it is identical to that of Whitman; it is poetical and forceful, sometimes overpowering, and always very personal and recognizable.

Meunier's work undoubtedly had a liberating effect on Belgian and European sculpture. His technique was less sensitive than Rodin's, his scope was narrower, but the message of his art was clear, forthright, and above all, valuable. Although a true proletarian artist, he never indulged in social propaganda of any kind. What he had to say was that physical labor was beautiful and noble. He said it with eloquence, with a great fund of technical skill and a restrained lyricism which gives his works such a warm and human touch. It was he who killed off the last remnants of academicism.

Rousseau

Two extremes menace the talent of every Belgian sculptor at his début: the temptation to give in to unbridled romanticism, and the even more dangerous lure of copying nature with a painful accuracy, the traditional realism. *Victor Rousseau* (1865-), perhaps the most harmonious personality among the living sculptors in Belgium, escaped both dangers. He learned his trade the hard way.

First he practiced it in the quarry where his father worked in Hainaut; later he was assistant to the builders and decorators of the colossal Palace of Justice in Brussels. Like Minne, he spent some time in the workshop of Charles van der Stappen. Paul Fierens, an outstanding Belgian art critic, observed that among the artists of his country *Rousseau* was one of the few whose vast culture breathes throughout his work. Indeed, the Romantic credo prevents many artists in Belgium as well as elsewhere from valuing an intellectual background as a perquisite for their individuality. Steering between the Charybdis of romanticism and the Scylla of realism, *Rousseau* became a classic; his works are characterized by a rare distinction of form, a great purity and what van Puyvelde rightly called a high degree of musicality and harmony. Like Wijnants and the other sculptors who learned their trade the hard way, he sculpts in marble and his technique is flawless. Literary inspiration or motifs do not deter him from his main object: the representation of the human

body, not as a simple combination of volumes and lines, but as the carrier of an idea and a soul. His works do not show off so well in the open, for his art is warm and intimate, not essentially monumental. Among his outstanding productions, there are *Demeter* and *Intimité* as well as an impressive number of very sensitive portrait busts (*Meunier* and *Princess Astrid*). Of the sculptors of his period, Rousseau is certainly the best balanced, the most harmonious personality.

Lambeaux

Periodically Belgian art is menaced by the extremes of its qualities. It has such a reserve of vitality and abundance that from time to time it becomes exuberant. Its sensuality, its fundamental joie de vivre breaks through unbridled and with a high degree of lyric potency.

That phenomenon happened again when *Jef Lambeaux* (1852-1908) started his tumultuous and brief career. Lambeaux has repeatedly been compared to Jordaens and indeed, his statues of disheveled women, of heavy, powerfully masculine men, of husky babies and children, reminded the public of the great painter's bacchic models. They had the same overwhelming vitality, the same coarseness and vulgarity, sometimes the same power. Some critics, though, consider that they surpass the bourgeois atmosphere of Jordaens' figures and attain a kind of minor epic grandeur. It may be true, for Lambeaux interpreted the vital force, the primitive urges of the lower classes, unhampered by conventions, natural in their sensuous ways. His figures are all endowed with a tremendous over-optimism and with nearly unearthly human strength. He created a modern baroque which, unlike the real baroque, sometimes lacked taste and a sufficient cultural background. His best known work which certainly constitutes the height of his achievement is the graceful group "The Kiss." He sculpted the statue of Brabo at Antwerp which interprets the romantic story of the city's origin, and blends perfectly with the Renaissance surroundings of its market-place.

Lambeaux has had a few talented followers: *Egide Rombaux* (1865-) who spent part of his career as a worker in the execution of the décor of railroad stations in Holland and Germany. His nudes are less violently animal than those of his master. Life and vitality are still abundant in his art, but he achieved a greater degree of balance between the mind and the flesh. Several good animal sculptors came out of Lambeaux' atelier or followed his in-

spiration: *J. L. Gaspar, Albéric Collin* and *Ray de Meester de Betzembroeck.*

Wouters Like Meunier, *Rik Wouters* (1882-1916) turned from sculpture to painting only to revert to sculpture. As a painter he was a revolutionist in the wake of James Ensor: there is no greater impressionist painter in Belgium, and although the historians of the impressionist movement have constantly ignored him, he is one of the finest painters of that school. His short life was dramatic and very painful, but his art, his sculpture and paintings alike, are a hymn to joy, inspired by a constant marvelling at nature's and man's beauty. He was a pure dionysiac artist, expressing his rapture with abandon and force.

His most famous work is of incredible audacity: *La Folle Danseuse* (The Wild Dancer). Rarely in the history of sculpture was such a violent movement controlled by such a sure sense of equilibrium. The statue is complete and wonderful in every detail: it is not only a frontal display. Like every good piece of sculpture it should be seen from all sides. Wouters was also an excellent portraitist: the bust of James Ensor is probably his masterpiece in this genre. It is done in heavy, powerful strokes, without care for detailed accuracy, but nervous and alive. Paul Fierens gave it the highest praise when he said that one cannot imagine Ensor any more except through the medium of this portrait.

Wijnants The case of *Ernest Wijnants* (1878-) is not unique in the history of sculpture in Belgium. Like Meunier, he started out as an artisan. He belonged to the numerous tribe of Mechlin wood-carvers who sculpt furniture for bourgeois families that want to recreate in their homes the atmosphere of former centuries. Wijnants longed to free himself from these traditions and to be a sculptor in his own right.

He spent a short time in the atelier of van der Stappen and, after a long and painful try at artistic independence, he developed into one of Belgium's outstanding and most personal artists. He had been a friend of Rik Wouters, and some of his early themes are akin to the sculptures of this artist. Like Wouters, he studied the beauty of woman in every-day life. His statue of the Market-vender is monumental and impressive in its popular simplicity. But the bulk of his work is devoted to the glorification of the female form, not in its academic perfection or according to the classical canon, but individualized and characteristic. A noble sensuality inspires him, his figures are proof of his thorough and intimate knowledge of the human body. He almost never succumbed to the temptation of simplifying volume to obtain easy monumental effects: as in Greek sculpture, as in Rodin's statues, as, in fact, in all timeless, worthwhile works of sculpture, every fragment of his statues has an organic life in itself. Sometimes he let himself be influenced by alien motifs: he used Egyptian, Greek or Assyrian elements to lend a certain greatness to his nude models, but these eccentricities cannot detract from his merits as a spontaneous artist. They denote no more than a lack of organization in his culture. More than any other artist in Belgium, he has devoted himself to decorative work in which he is very clever and fortunate, but his main title to glory remains in his renderings of female nudes, entirely unacademic and amazingly alive. Some of his most charming, poetical works represent very young girls, colt-like in their wiry grace, the very images of the spring of life in its hesitating ardor.

Wijnants, who was an excellent teacher, trained a great number of remarkable pupils, among whom are Bosmans, Eikermans, Van Esbroeck, S. de Brouwer and others.

Minne The master of Belgian sculpture, the grand old man in this field, as James Ensor is in painting, was *Georges Minne* (1866-1941). Minne's work falls into two clearly defined periods which coincide with the evolution of his thinking and even with the changes in the intellectual and artistic atmosphere of the country. He was born in Ghent, a contemporary and friend of Maurice Maeterlinck, and in the beginning of his career he was highly conscious of the social problems of his industrial home town. He had practically no schooling, although he spent one year as a distracted pupil of Charles van der Stappen in Brussels. His earlier works are done in a naturalistic vein; he scrutinizes closely the worn faces of old men and workers, representing them with the painful accuracy of a Holbein, but like the German master succeeding in binding all the details together in a unity that transcends realism. But the major part of his work is completely different: he left Ghent to retire to a little village some miles distant, St. Martens-Laethem, which became a Belgian Barbizon. There he lived a monastic existence and his art grew extremely personal and detached from time and locale. He sculpted the *Fountain*, an ensemble of five kneeling youths, wiry and hieratic figures who carry a precious burden. Many of the works of this per-

iod have a vague symbolistic significance which relates them to the inspiration of Maeterlinck's writings. But these motifs disappeared soon from his work and almost all his later figures are devoted to the portrayal of highly poetical female personages; a mother clasping a child and lifting it up in an affectionate and triumphant gesture. This statuary is entirely timeless and of great purity of line. It also had a mystic connotation, but except for a statue of the *Sacred Heart*, Minne never resorted to the dogmatic imagery of the church. The bulk of his work though is impregnated with a deep religious sentiment. Often his figures display a melancholy akin to Glück's music, but they are forcefully constructed and more than once this melancholy is vanquished by the quiet radiance of a deep joy. No sculptor in modern Belgium achieved a greater degree of purity and life. His art is essentially a noble one; to his contemporaries his work was a lesson of honesty, his constant and refined economy of sculptural means of expression taught them the value of self-discipline and of restraint. Nobody has elevated sculpture in Belgium to the height of aristocracy which was Minne's outstanding gift.

He made a considerable number of drawings in the same spirit as his sculptures. They are not exactly groundwork for his plastic works, but they are distinctly the work of a sculptor: they are reduced to essential outlines and a few strokes of shade. It is impossible to separate this part of his production from his sculptures. Both are highly valuable, but above all he was a sculptor and as such he deeply influenced Belgian art and made his influence felt far beyond the borders of his homeland, especially in France and in Germany. He undoubtedly influenced Lehmbrück.

Jespers Modern principles in sculpture were first applied in Belgium by *Oscar Jespers* (1887). It meant a return to the primitive constructive values as taught by the cubist and expressionist. It meant also a reverent intelligence of the lessons brought to Europe by the anonymous sculptors of Africa and Oceania. Sentimentality, even sentiment, was banned and expression was to be achieved only by geometrical means. This revolt against humanistic sculpture was led by Jespers who, after a short period of highly impressionistic efforts, developed into the outstanding expressionist sculptor in his country.

Never was he a pure cubist, though, and he always respected the basic forms of his models. But he destroyed their innate loveliness to replace it with an impression of power, an effect he achieved by

a very scholarly balance of volumes and construction, by a remarkable tenseness and harmony. Willingly avoiding the expression of more human sentiment, he was destined to create his masterpiece in the decorative style. For the Belgian Pavillion at the Paris World's Fair of 1935, he created a big panel in hammered brasswork which revived that specific Walloon art in Belgium and proved his own amazing versatility. Resorting to another medium, he made in collaboration with *Henri Puvrez* (1893) the great bas-relief which adorned the Belgian Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939 and which was rebuilt in Richmond, Virginia at the Virginia Union University. It consists of enormous baked panels. The Museum of Modern Art in New York possesses his statue "St. Anthony," a fair example of his freer style.

Permeke The greatest of all living Belgian painters, *Constant Permeke* (1886), whose admirers once called him the "Dieu le Père de la peinture flamande, God the Father of Flemish painting," took up sculpture after he became fifty. First he fumbled with a technique his impatience and impulsiveness prevented him from acquiring gradually; later he showed a number of colossal statues which were very akin to the models he uses as a painter and as a draftsman. This sculptural work, however, is fragmentary and has never been displayed in sufficient quantity to allow a definite judgment. Little as it is known, it remains remarkable and shows the same power and monumental scope as his paintings.

Cantré Although better known as a wood engraver of unusual talent and fecundity, *Jozef Cantré* (1890) is one of the good Flemish sculptors. His work is essentially constructive and based on the equilibrium of volumes much more than on human expression. He created in a very personal style a number of monuments which show his decorative and monumental gifts.

Grard Two of the best known and most personal young sculptors of today are *George Grard* (1901) and *Charles Leplae* (1903). Grard studied in his home town, Tournai, where he found an excellent teacher, received the Rubens Prize in 1930, and settled down in a small fisher-hut near the Flemish coast. His works of the last decades are nearly all variations on the same theme: a full-bodied young woman whose features he reproduces not in a naturalistic fashion, but with a great sense of plastic finesse and monumentality. Grard is influenced by Maillol in his choice of an unconven-

tional model, but strongly individualistic in the representation of a warm, very lively and self-contained human being.

Leplae *Leplae* started out as an expressionist, under the influence of negro art. He completed his law studies and, dissatisfied with the mathematical and geometrical inspiration of his work, studied for a year at the atelier of Despiau. Since then, he has abandoned all willful deformation and theoretical reasoning in dealing with his materials: one of Belgium's most renowned critics has called his art, like that of Grard, "animistic," because it does not resort to the magical, primitive essentials of sculpture, but stresses the role of emotion and the necessity for having every sculpture animated by a soul. His busts and portraits show a highly refined talent and an excellent technique. He gives much time and talent to works of smaller size and of decorative nature: here his fantasy displays itself in graceful images inspired by folklore motifs. Among the younger talents in Belgium he is certainly the best endowed poetically.

For a hundred years Belgian sculpture has felt the influences of the great artistic currents in Europe. It does not have a claim to tremendous originality, but it can, however, point to two figures who have in their turn influenced the art of Europe: Meunier and Minne. Curiously enough both artists express a side of the psychic characteristics of the Belgian people which constantly appear in their plastic efforts as well as in their literary and intellectual output: a profound sense and love of reality and a craving for spiritual and religious concentration. Meunier exalted the scenery of the mines, the mills and the docks. Minne retired to the inner circle of his profoundly religious feelings. Both taught a great lesson to sculptors all over Europe. Both were world figures.

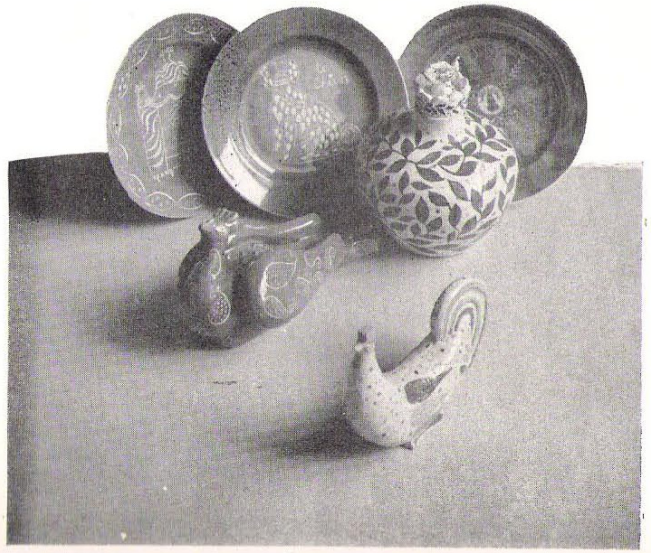
It may be that modern Belgian sculpture as a whole lacked audacity and temerity: it is certainly not experimental. The reason for this inherent wisdom may reside in the fact that in Belgium between sculptors and public there is no breach, no rupture of contact and that their art is part of the scenery as well as of the home.

* * *

It would be extremely hazardous even to try to classify the numerous talented sculptors active at present in Belgium who have not been discussed at length in this brief survey. Some follow academic canon; the greatest number are devoted to a more or less personal style, easily recognizable and highly individual; a small

number work in the spirit of constructivism and abstractionism. Choosing at random, we cite the names of *A. Bonnetain,* an admirable medalist, *W. Kreitz,* an excellent portrait sculptor, *O. de Clerck,* whose work is quite decorative; *L. Vleeshouwers,* who intelligently adorned the enormous façade of the Orval Abbey; *K. Aubroeckx,* who achieved similar results at Dixmude; *Dolf Ledel,* a romantic, highly impressionistic artist; *G. Petit,* endowed with classic grace; *A. Wansart* and *M. Rau* whose sculptures are severe and highly stylized; *M. d'Havelooze,* whose work is reminiscent of Minne; *A. Vriens, Poetou, Poels* and *A. Meertens,* who steadfastly develop into interesting artistic personalities. The abstract style is followed by *V. Servranckx* and by the younger *W. Anthoons.* This survey is not an honors list and therefore we do not intend to list the names of all the others, which would be legion.

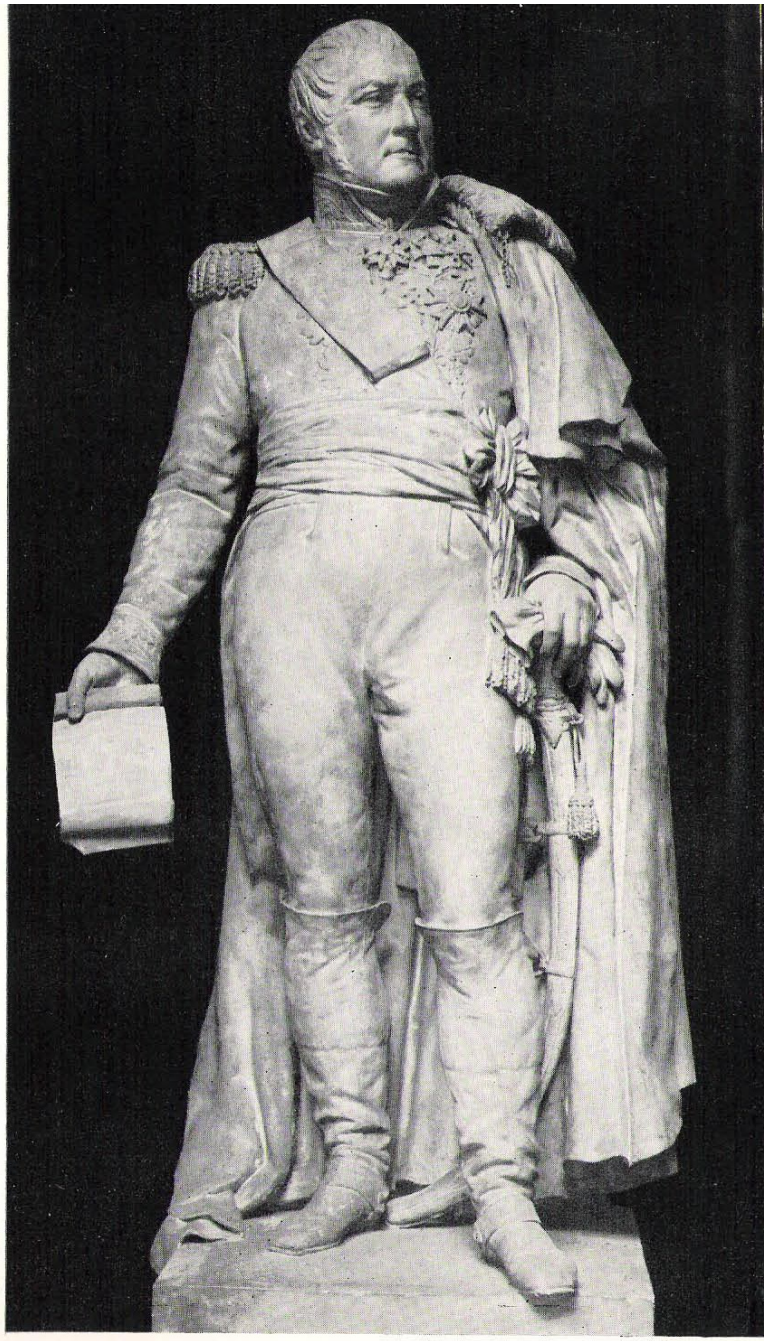
Since about 1930, Belgian artists have earnestly tried to revive an ancient national handicraft, that of ceramics. In the 18th century Brussels ceramics had a worldwide renown. Encouraged by the Government as well as by the intelligent aid of industrial ceramists, a number of artists devised models of small ceramic art. The most successful was *Pierre Caille.* Other talented artists in this field are *G. Desbrebecq, A. Hupet, L. Waem, I. Zack, etc.* They are a highly enthusiastic group of young people full of delightful fantasy.



Ceramics by Pierre Caille.

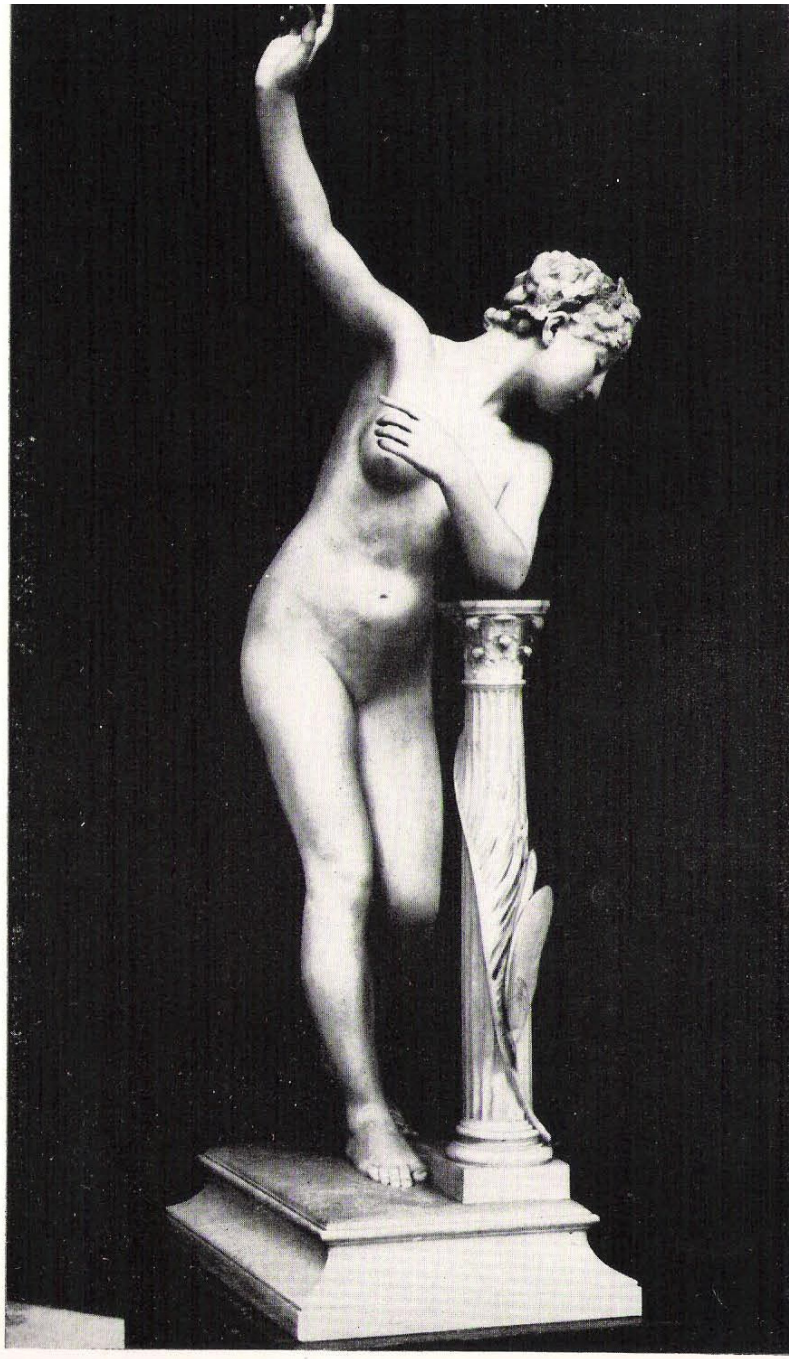
ILLUSTRATIONS

Godecharle, Lambert (1750-1835): **Terra-cotta Model of Eros,** Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.
Godecharle was a graceful and delicate artist, strongly influenced by classical sculpture. The charming Eros figure acquired by the Walters Art Gallery in 1941 is a fair example of his art.

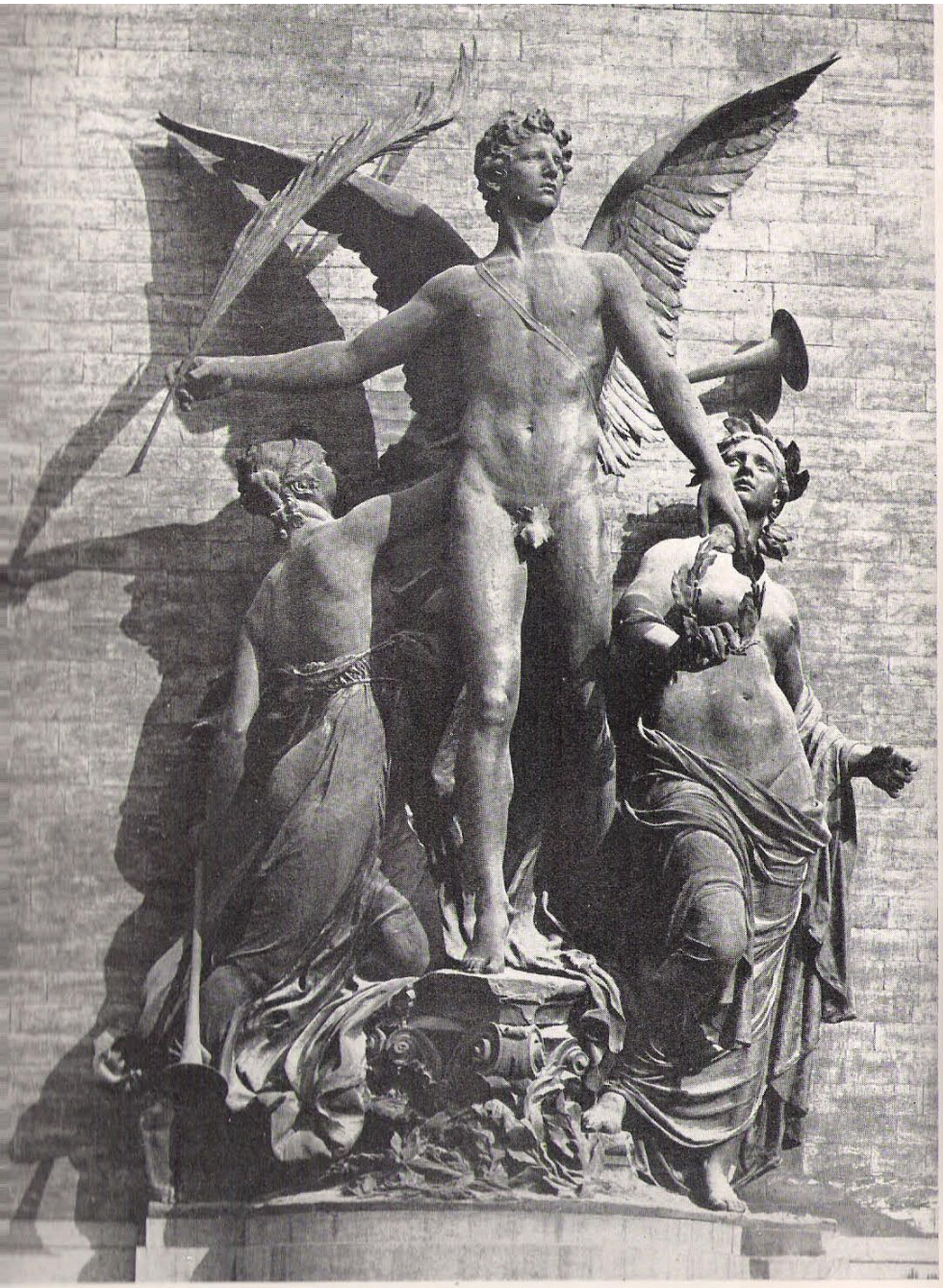


Geefs, Guillaume (1805-1883): **Statue of General Belliard,** monument in Brussels.
In this work Geefs reached a poise and an intensity of life that in none of his hundreds of portraits of official personages did he ever achieve. An extreme classical simplicity and dignity make this sober monument the best among the many statues that adorn Belgium's streets and squares.

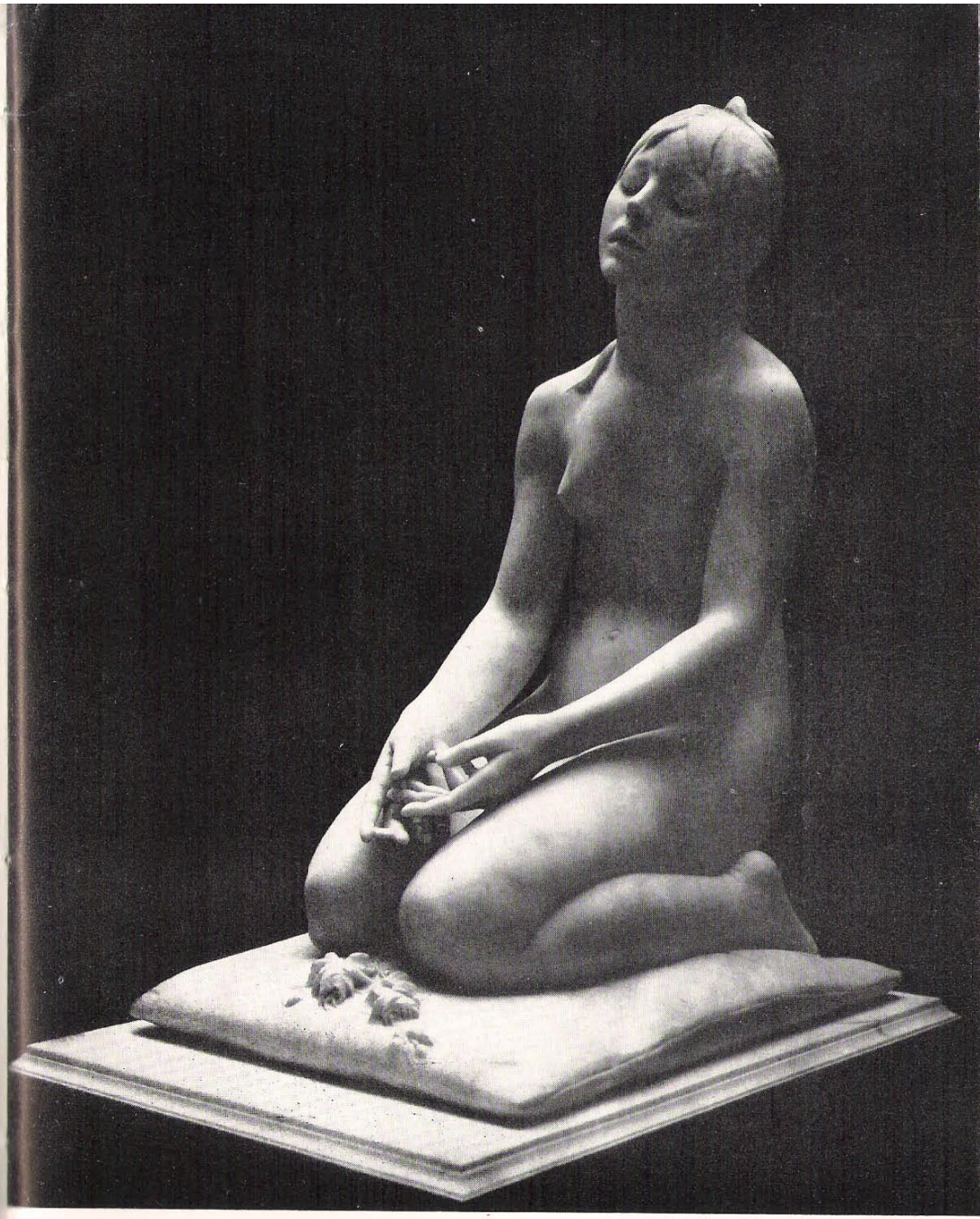
Geefs, Guillaume: Portrait of the Engraver Théodore Schaepkens, Town Hall, Brussels.
In a more romantic vein and confronted with a model who possessed a great deal of character, Geefs transcended the commercialism which was to kill his inspiration.



De Vigne, Paul (1843-1901): **Immortality,** Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
However artificial and conventional the pose, de Vigne's statue was recognized as a remarkable work for its excellent plastic qualities and its subtle modeling.



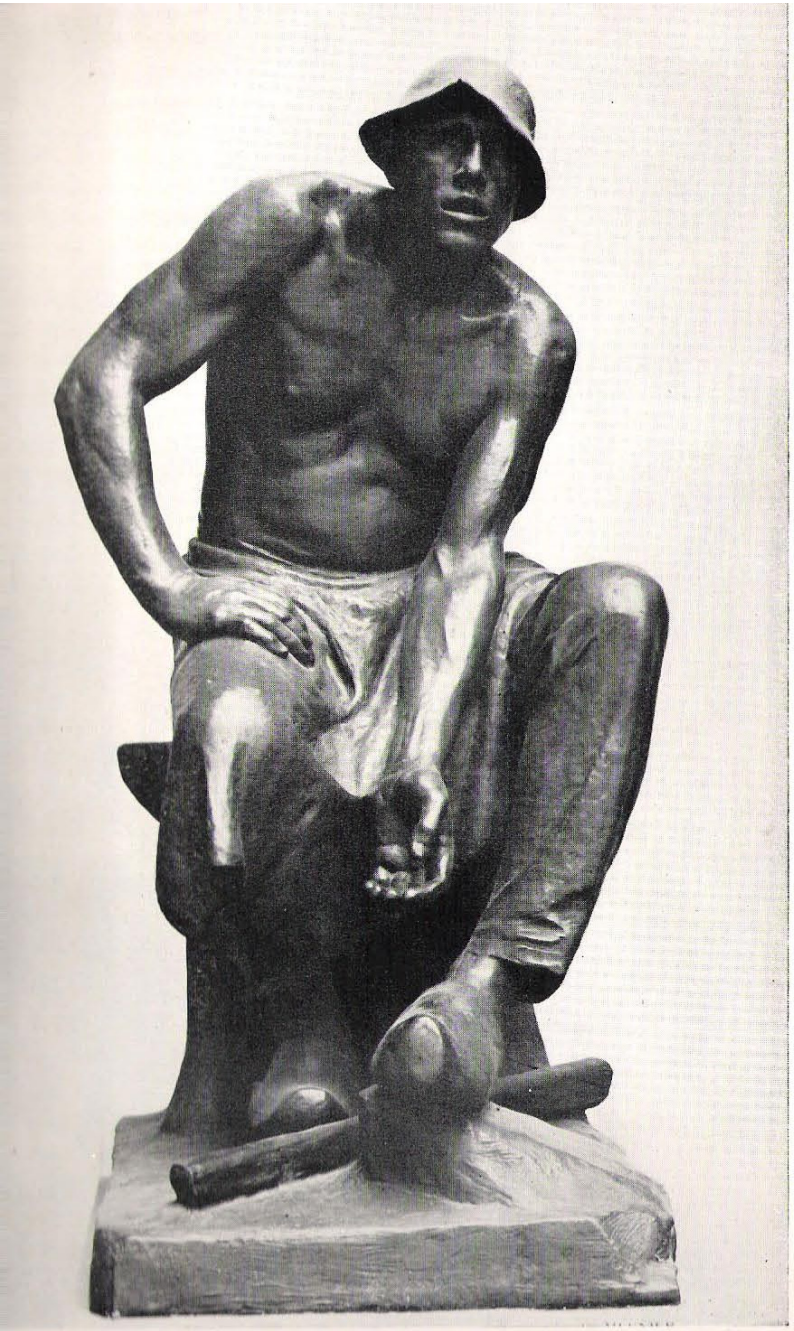
De Vigne, Paul: Glorification of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
Noble without being pompous, this group shows the classical qualities of de Vigne's talent.



Dillens, Julien (1849-1904): **Figure for a Tomb,** Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
Dillens was one of several Belgian sculptors influenced by Florentine art. Although his work had poise and distinction, it often lacked personality.

Meunier, Constantin (1831-1905): **The Hammerman,** The Art Institute of Chicago.
The greatest merit of Meunier was to treat the everyday gestures and attitudes of the modern worker in such a way as to reveal their nobility and grace.

Meunier, Constantin: Coal-damp (Le Grisou), Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
Meunier never made concessions to the anecdotal art of his time, but he could not resist underlining the tragedy of the mine-workers of Wallonia who all too often fell victims to the dangers of their profession. Here a miner's mother bends over the body of her son.

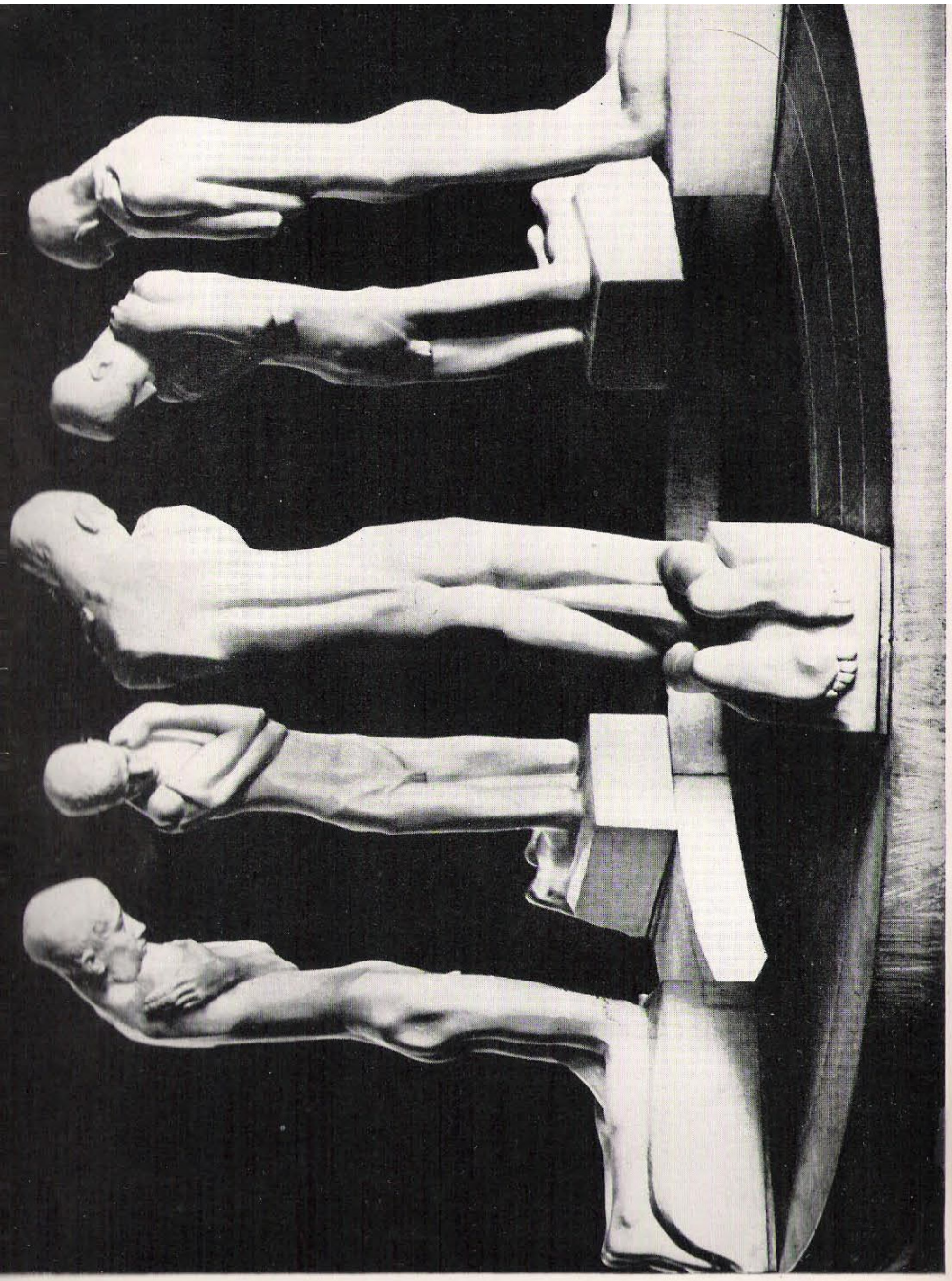


Meunier, Constantin: The Puddler, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
The appalling ugliness of man's modern attire did not prevent Meunier from giving to his models a plastic grandeur which was quite novel in his time.

Meunier, Constantin: Antwerp Docker, Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp.
The most popular and perhaps the most expressive of Meunier's statues of the worker.

Braecke, Pierre (1859-1936): **The Prodigal Son**, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
Sentimental in feeling and soft in technique, Braecke's best work still has a definite appeal.

Minne, Georges (1866-1941): **Weeping Women.**
This work of Minne dates from his earlier years and leans on the tradition of Gothic sculpture. Repetition of a simple motif as witnessed in this group remained one of the sculptor's favorite techniques.



Minne, Georges: The Well, monument in Brussels House of Parliament and in Ghent.
The Well is typical of Minne's symbolic art. It is among all his works the best known, and its influence on European sculpture in the early 20th century should not be underestimated.

Minne, Georges: Kneeling Youth, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
This figure dates from the period when Minne had achieved his full stature as a sculptor. Utter simplicity and strong rhythmic construction characterize it.

Minne, Georges: Worker, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
A few times Minne was hypnotized by the tremendous possibilities of the naturalistic study of the human face, but his inquiry did not stop at the surface: what he aimed at was the soul, the psychological portrait of his model.

Minne, Georges: Mother and Child, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
No other theme appears so often in Minne's works. Most of the time, the mother exults in the possession of the child. In this statue, the drama is apparent and stringent.

Minne, Georges: Reliquary-bearer, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
More than a dozen times, Minne treated this subject; a slender youth carefully holding a cask of relics. He multiplied this figure in **The Well.**

Minne, Georges: Portrait Bust, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
All Minne's figures express a pensive mood. They seem to live in a world created by Maeterlinck, to be bathed in an atmosphere of poetic unreality.

Lambeaux, Jef (1852-1908): **The Kiss,** Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. This graceful group represents the height of Lambeaux's achievements.

Lambeaux, Jef: Brabo. Statue on the market place of Antwerp. Using as a background the Renaissance Town Hall of Antwerp, Lambeaux represented here the legendary hero of the city.

Wouters, Rik (1882-1916): **Domestic Worries,** monument at Watermael, near Brussels.
Wouters' production as a painter and as a sculptor is dedicated almost completely to the glorification of his wife. This striking image of a woman confronted by the "travaux ennuyeux et faciles" (the annoying and easy tasks of the household) reveals his impressionist technique.

Wouters, Rik: Attitude.
One of the earlier graceful works of the sculptor, impressionistic in technique.

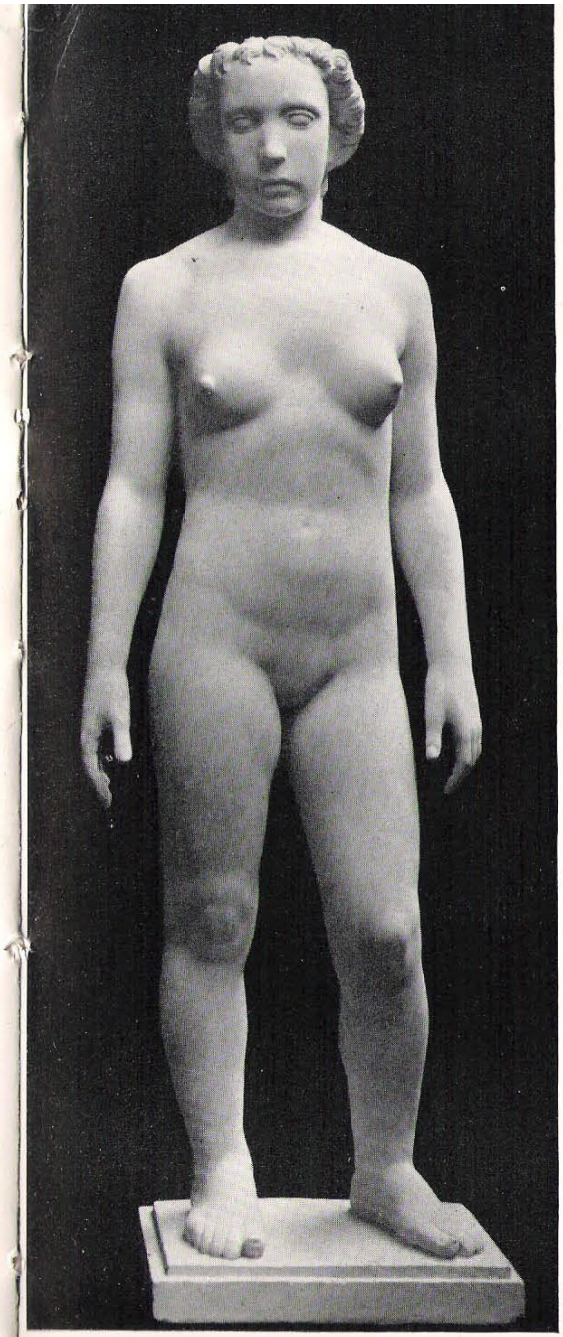
Wouters, Rik: The Wild Dancer, Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp.
Although Wouter's career was marred by tragic accident and came to an early end, his work was a constant exaltation of life.

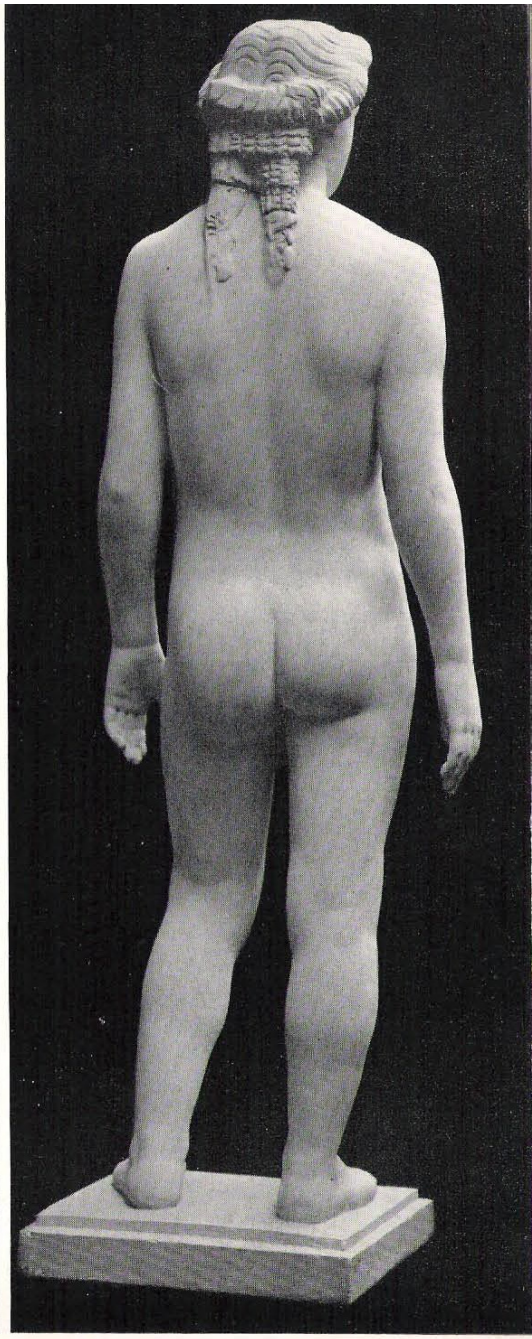
Wouters, Rik:. The Wild Dancer.
Detail. This rear view of La Folle Danseuse reveals the dynamic character of his art.

Wijnants, Ernest (1878-): **"Marieke,"** lindenwood, gilded. Property of Queen Elizabeth of Belgium.
Although a great number of Wijnants' statues are devoted to feminine beauty unadorned, he sometimes interprets the charm of the Flemish youths in their Sunday best.

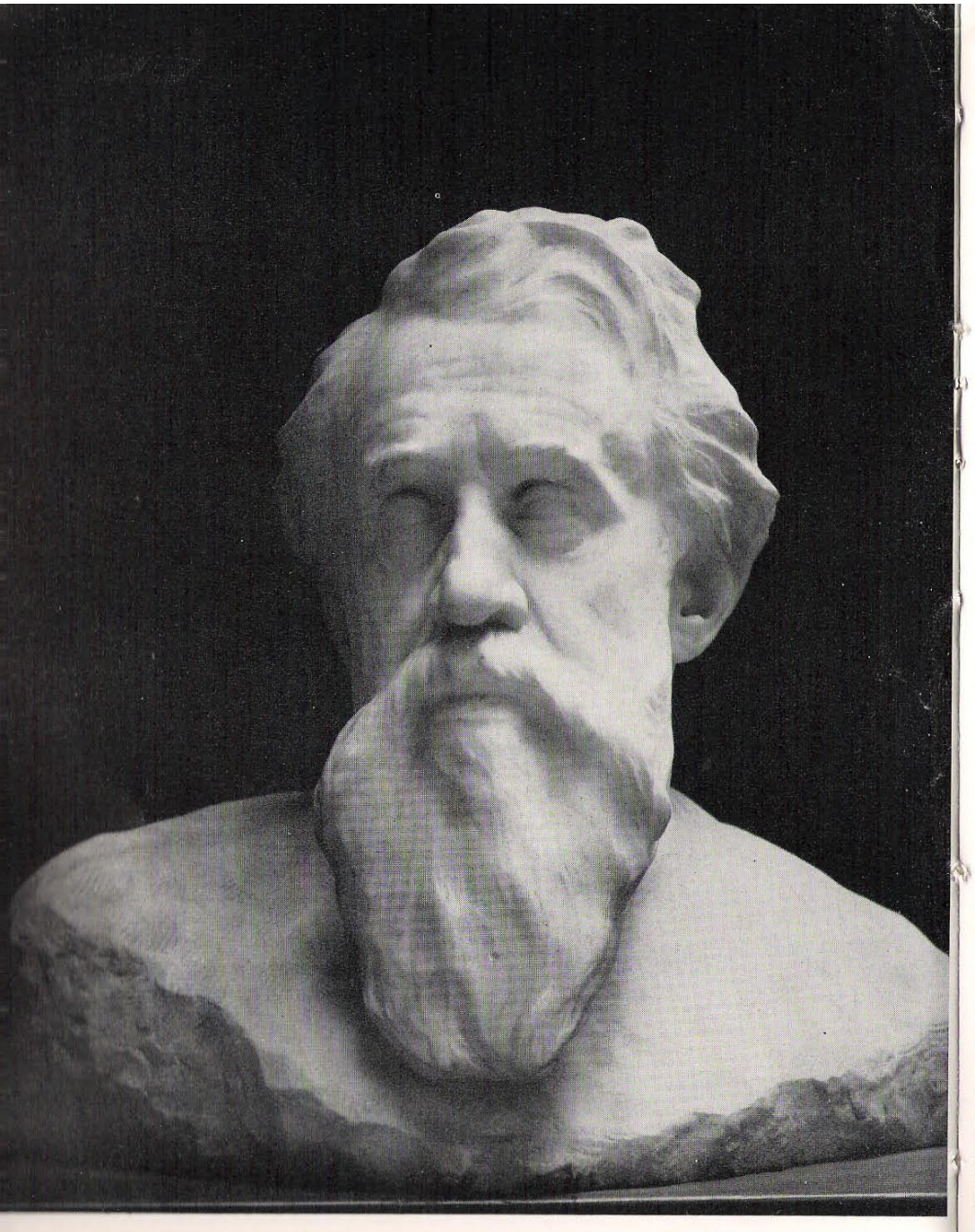
Wijnants, Ernest: Market-vender, monument at Boom, Belgium.
A combination of imposing monumentality and delicate psychological interpretation marks this statue of the Market-vender.

Wijnants, Ernest: Fragment of ornamentation of a public building: **Sunday-pleasures.**
More than any other sculptor in Belgium, Wijnants has devoted himself to the decoration of public buildings in which art he has been extremely successful.

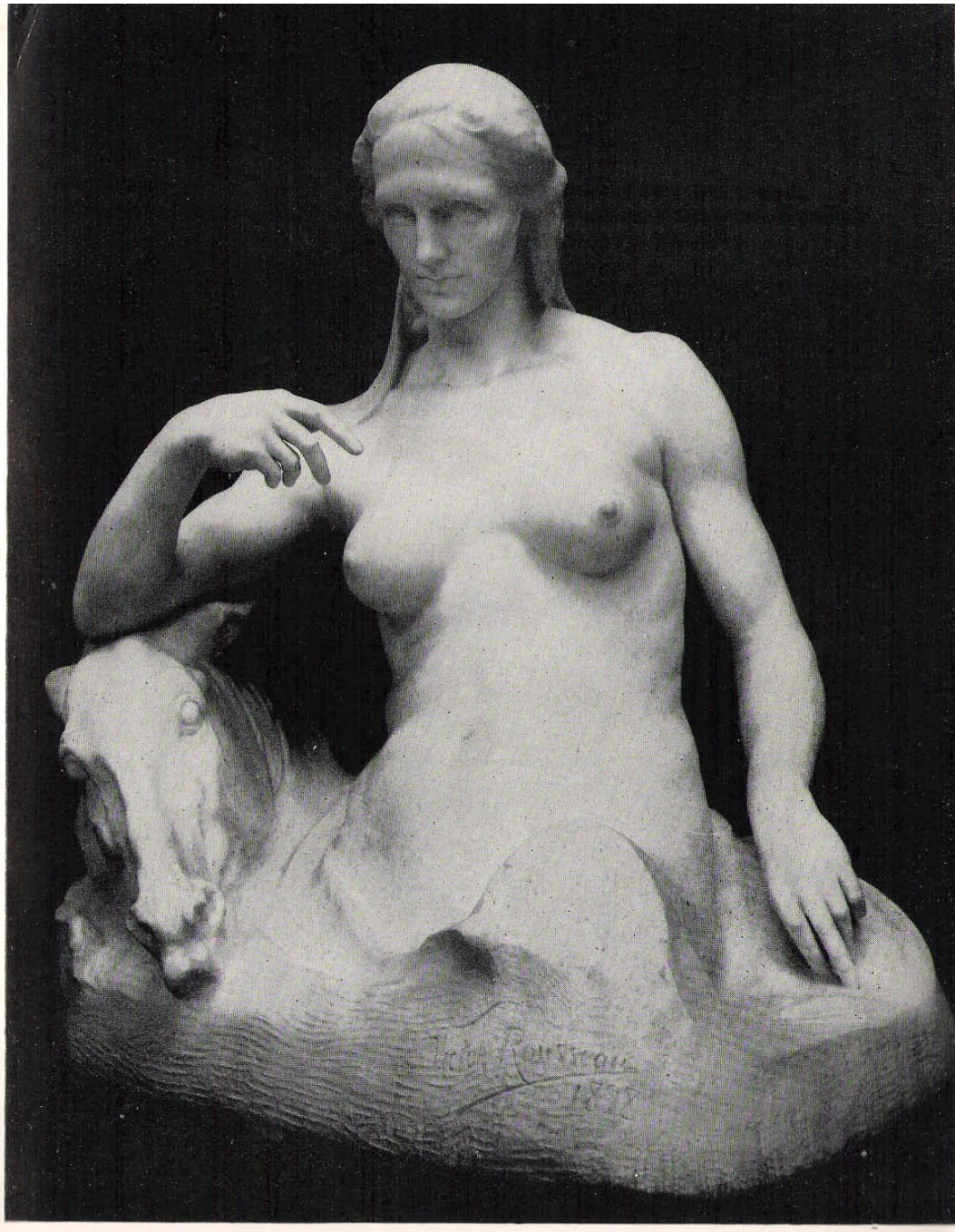




Wijnants, Ernest: Standing Nude. Artist's collection, Mechlin. Diverting frankly from the classical canon, Wijnants achieved an effect of sincerity and harmony.



Rousseau, Victor (1865-): **Portrait of Constantin Meunier,** Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
A refined technique and a highly intelligent perception of psychology are the earmarks of Rousseau's talent.



Rousseau, Victor: Demeter, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
A female figure as timeless and mild as the goddess of the earth herself.

Rousseau, Victor: The Sisters of Illusion, Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
More than once Rousseau successfully recaptured the spirit of classical Greece.

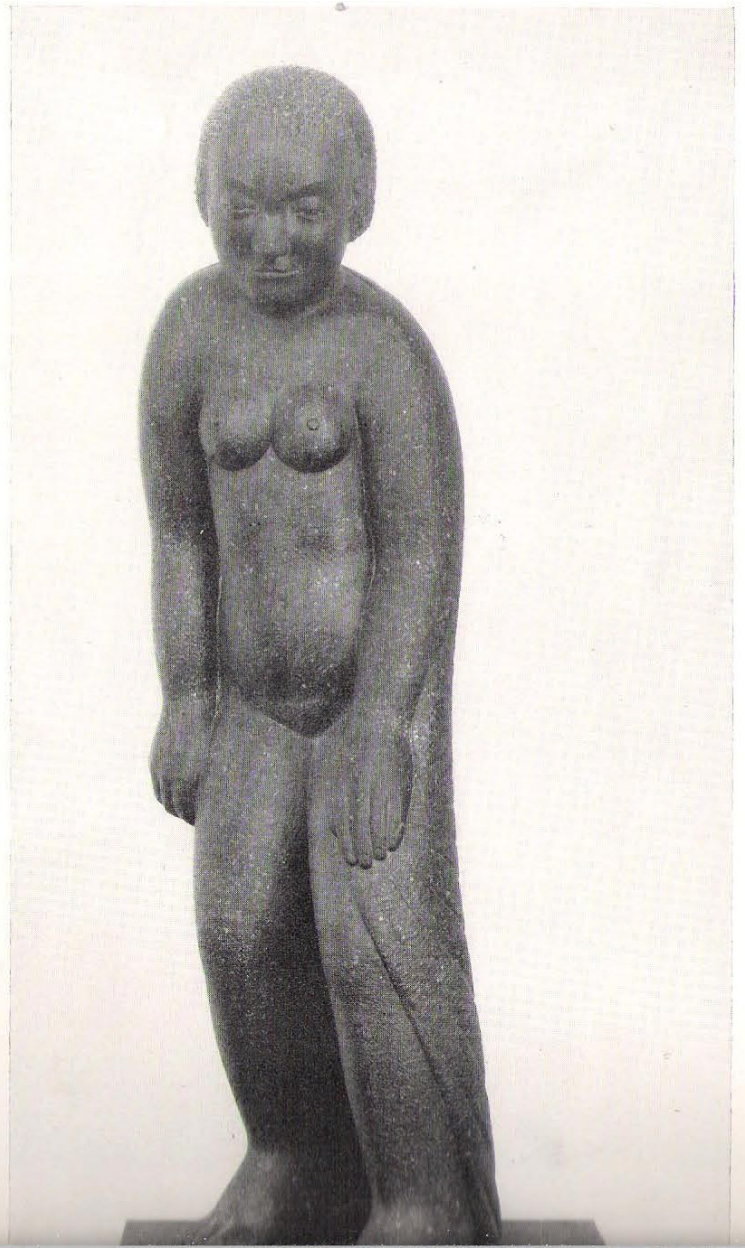
Rousseau, Victor: The Oriental Dancer, Private collection, Brussels.
The features of a given model became the pretext for the expression of timeless sentiment.

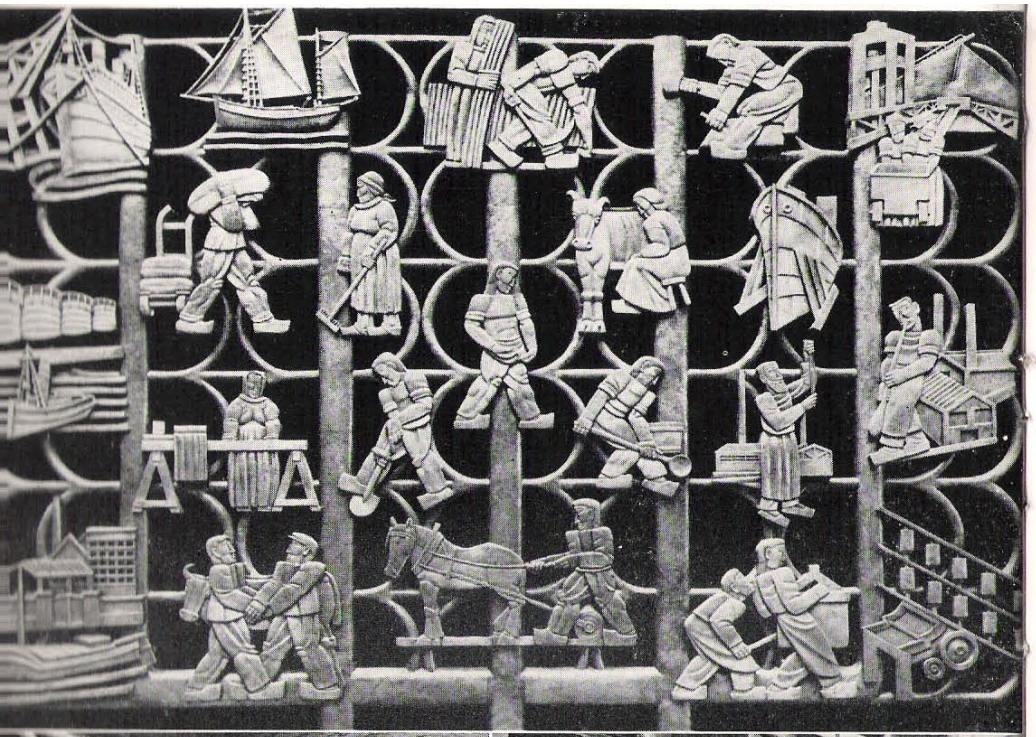
Vinçotte, Thomas (1850-1925): **Bust of King Leopold II of Belgium,** Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
The forceful physiognomy of the great Belgian ruler was admirably rendered in this bust.

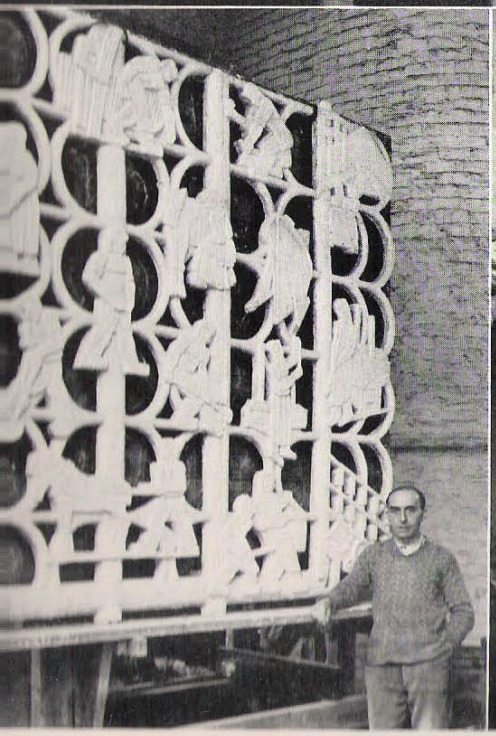
Lagae, Jules (1862-1931): **Mother and Child,** Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels.
The warmth and intimacy which the Florentine artists introduced into the portrayal of motherhood, were successfully captured by Lagae in this, one of his major works.

Puvrez, Henri (1893-): **Bather**, Belgian Pavilion Paris World's Fair, 1935.
Graceful simplicity and careful construction make Puvrez one of the country's outstanding sculptors.

Puvrez, Henri: Bather, Collection Mrs. Benjamin P. Watson, New York.
Doing away with anecdotal niceties, the artist tried for monumentality and rhythm.

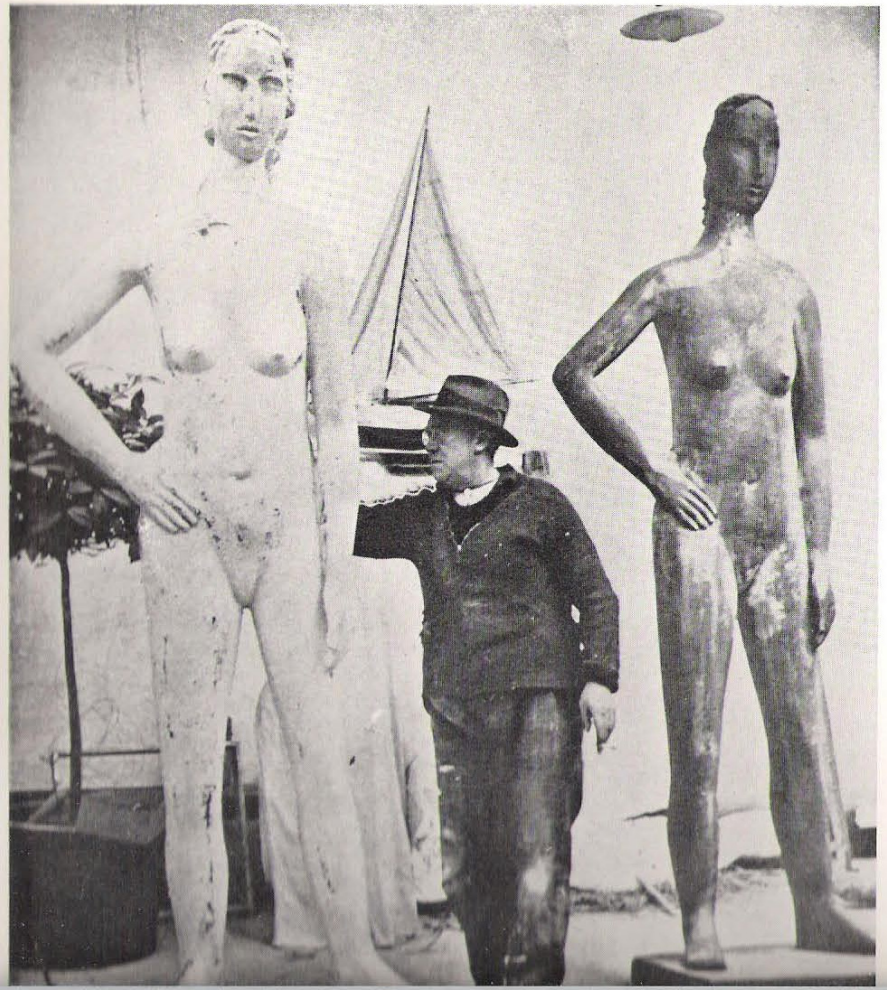


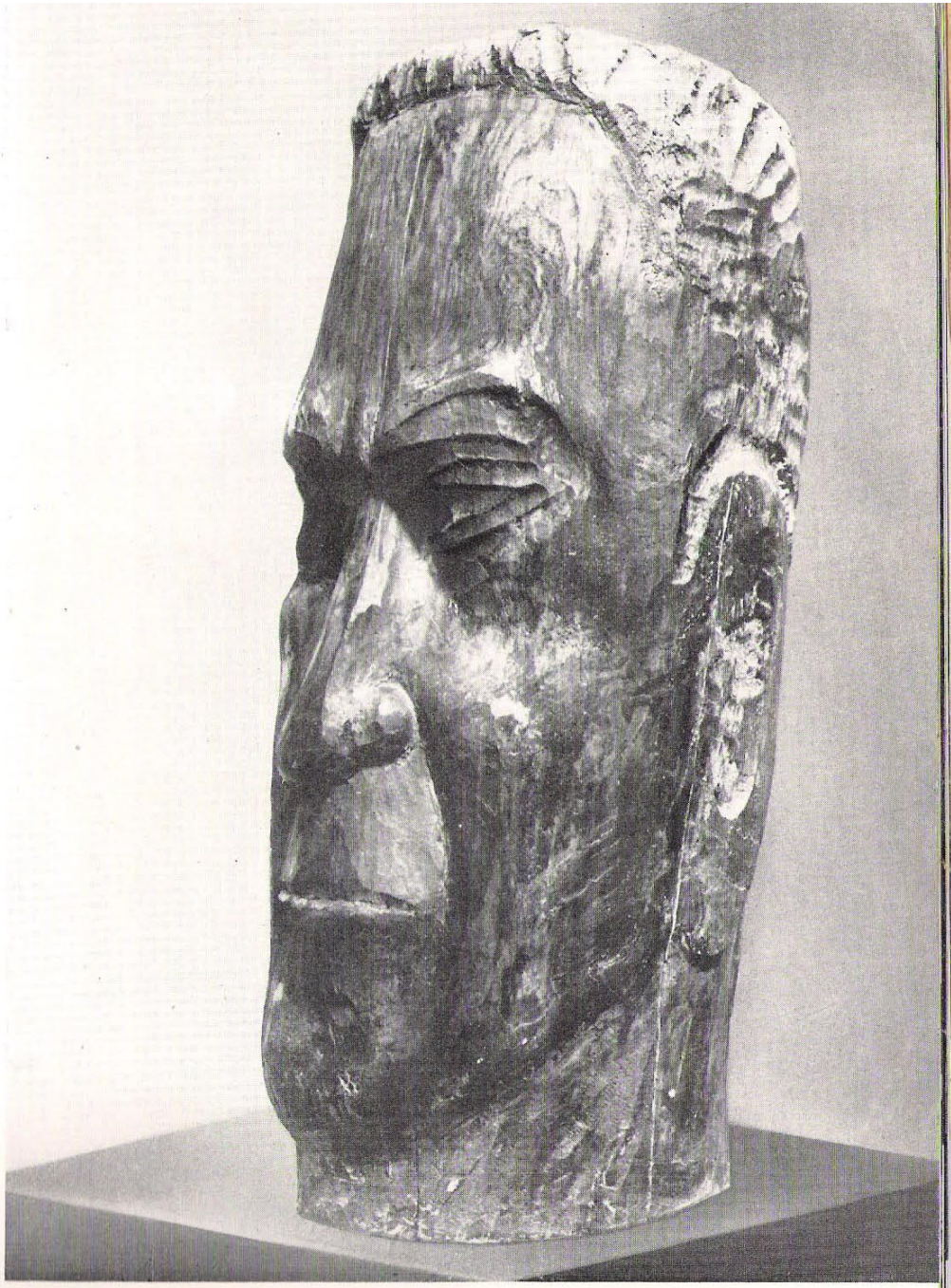




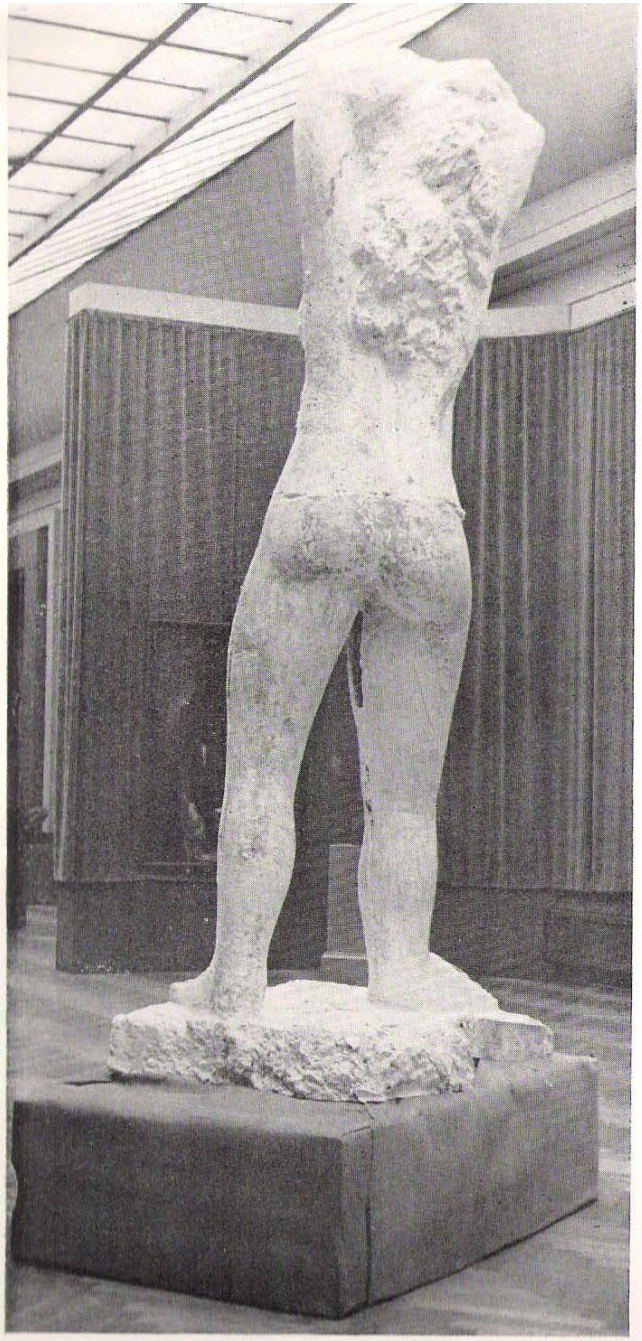
Jespers, Oscar (1887-): **Bas-relief,** in hammered copper, Belgian Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair, 1935.
The photographs show: (left, top), the finished work; (left, lower), the plaster model of the right half; (right, lower), a craftsman working a detail in copper; and on this page the finished detail.

Permeke, Constant (1886-): **The Artist at work.**
Although primarily a painter, Permeke tried his hand at sculpture. His figures are gigantic and powerful, simple and brutal but never indifferent or casual.

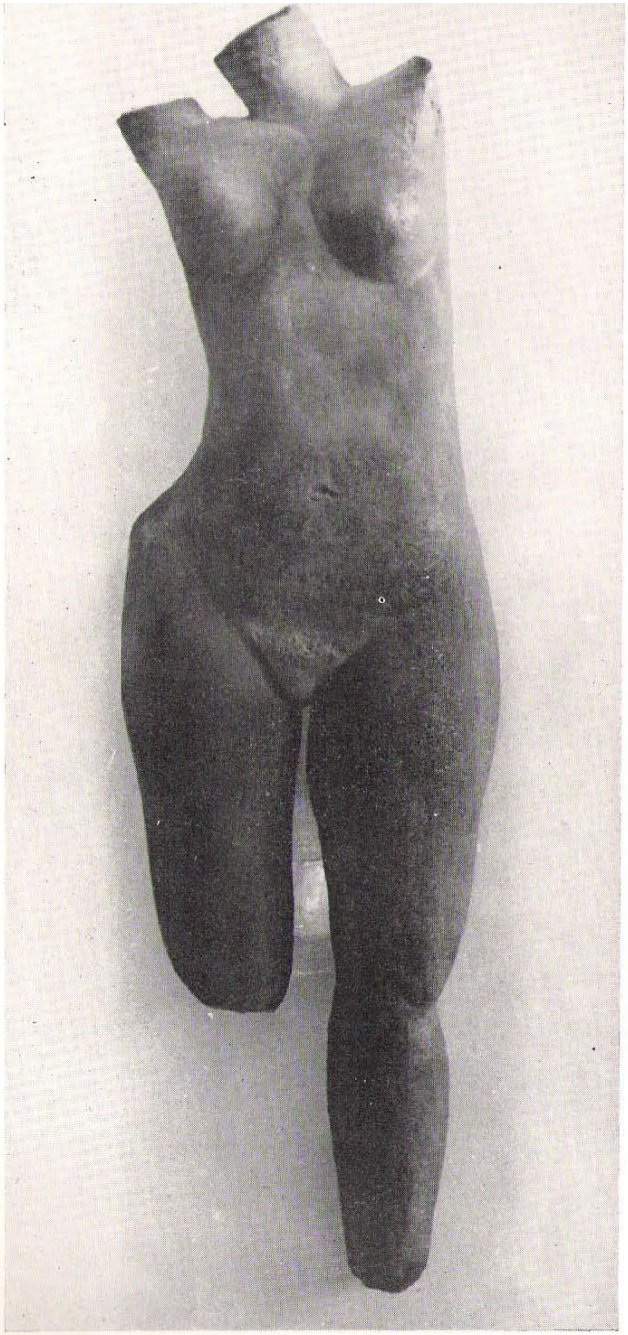




Permeke, Constant: Selfportrait.
Without doubt Permeke is Belgium's most gifted painter today. He gave an impressive rendering of his own characteristic and strong personality in this self-likeness.



Permeke, Constant: Standing Nude.
Like his paintings and drawings, Permeke's sculptures are a mixture of elementary force and subtle refinement.

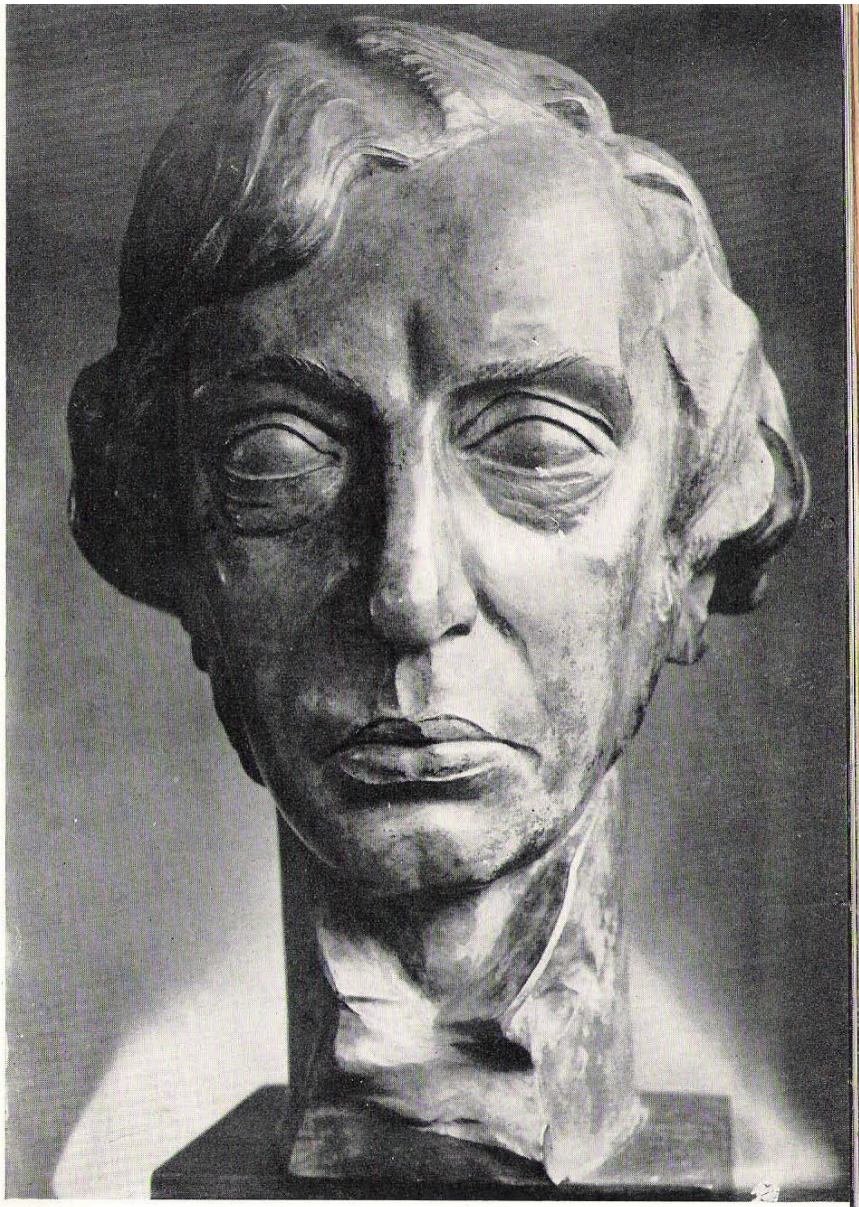


Permeke, Constant: Torso.
Some critics have called Permeke a forceful barbarian. A sculpture like this shows how wrong they are in applying a label to his art.

Jespers, Oscar, and Puvrez, Henri: Baked bas-relief, **Belgium at Work,** ornamenting the Belgian Friendship Building of the Virginia Union University, Richmond, Virginia.

In conjunction, Jespers and Puvrez modeled this 1 foot bas-relief which represents from left to right: the seacoast, fishing, rural works and pleasures, heavy industry, coal mining and glass blowing. In style and spirit both artists are akin and the result of their collaboration is an especially happy one.

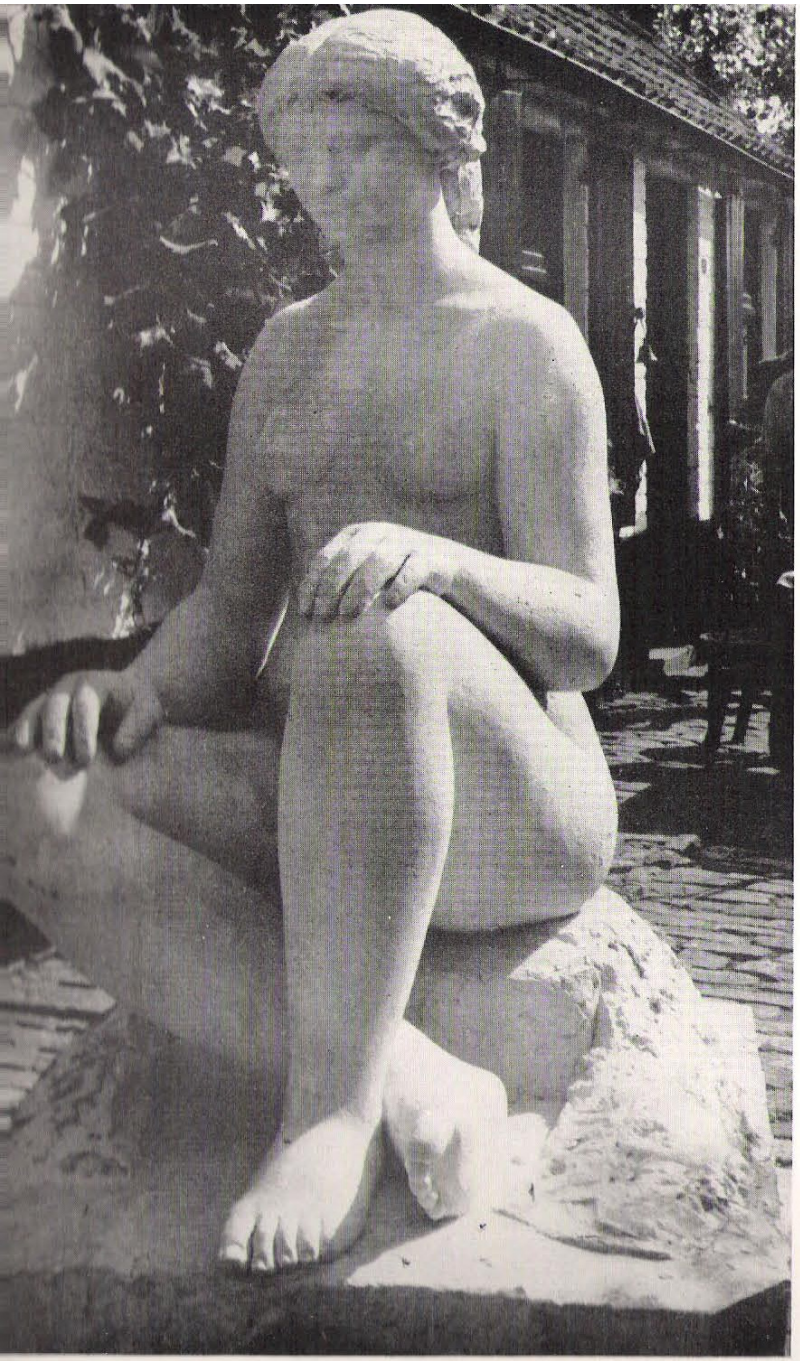
Jespers, Oscar: **St. Anthony,** Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The theme of the old legend is treated here with striking modernism and severe simplicity. Acquired in 1940.



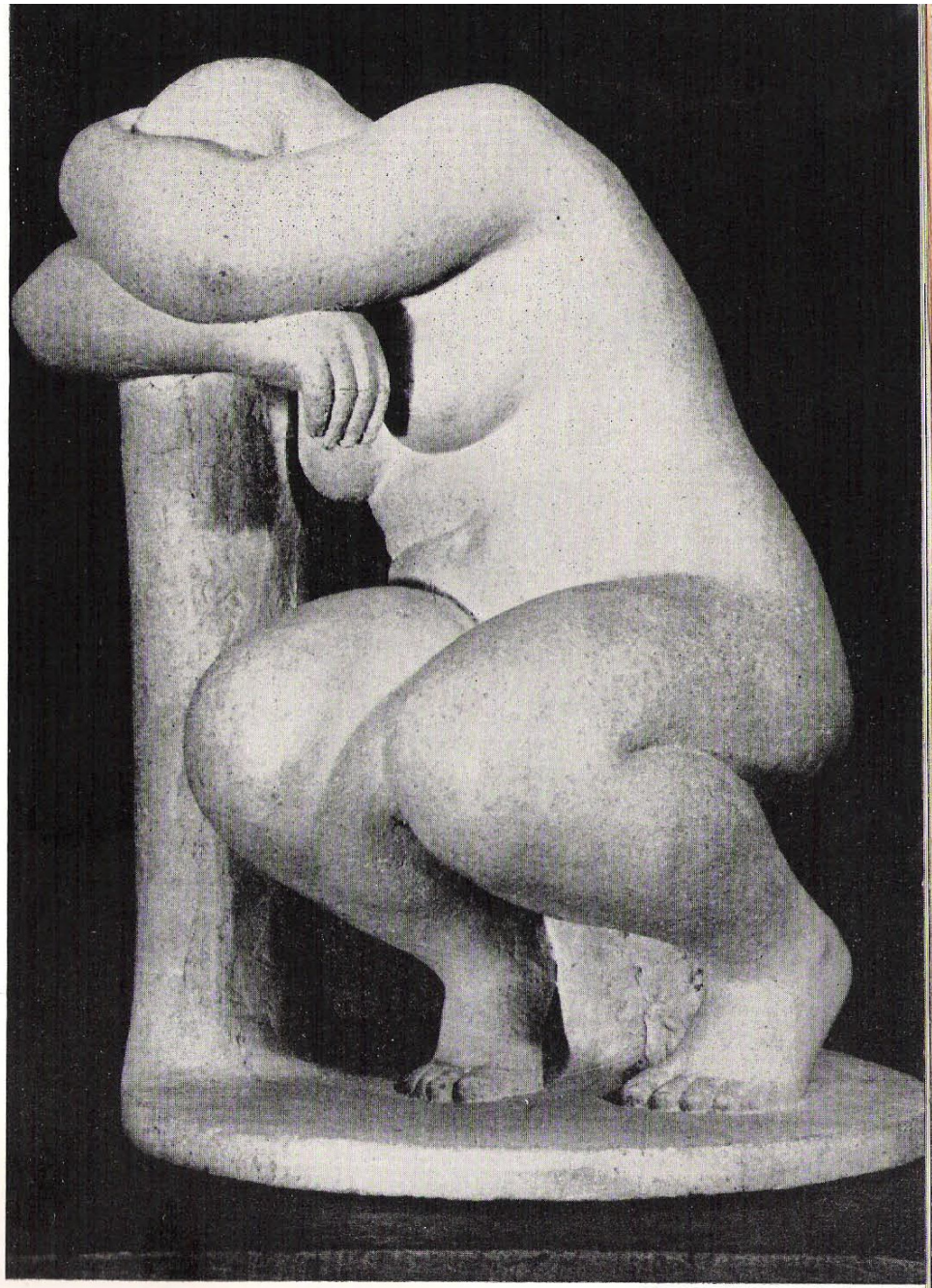
Cantré, Jozef (1890-): **Portrait of the poet Karel van de Woestijne,** Boymans Museum, Rotterdam. (Bronze).
The striking features of the greatest of all Flemish poets are reproduced with fidelity and a deep sense of monumentality.

Cantré, Jozef: Bather, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent. (Bronze).
The sculptor is evidently more concerned with harmonious rhythm than with psychological niceties.

Cantré, Jozef: Monument to Edouard Anseele, Ghent. Detail of head (insert).
Anseele was a vigorous labor leader who emancipated the Ghent textile workers. The sculptor symbolizes his influence on the masses by means of four figures.



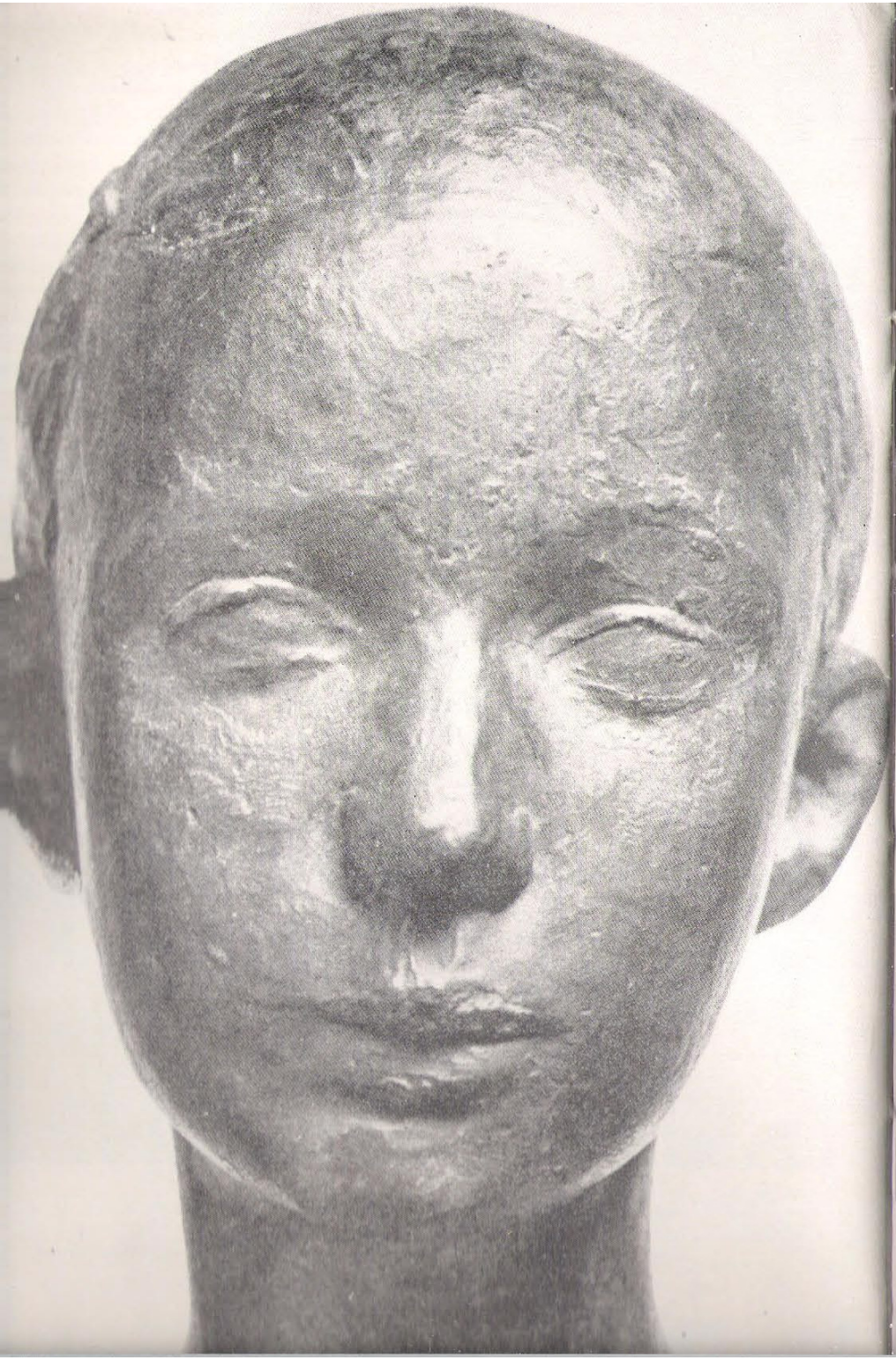
Grard, Georges (1901-): **Female Figure.**
Grard's figures nearly always give the impression of being gigantic although their scale is normal.



Grard, Georges: Sleeping Woman.
Unconventional and powerful, a daring contradiction of accepted canons.

Grard, Georges: Head. Detail of page 68.

Leplae, Charles (1901-): **Portrait of Mrs. de Kinder,** Private collection, Brussels.
Gracefulness and sensibility characterize Leplae's art, as shown in this portrait.

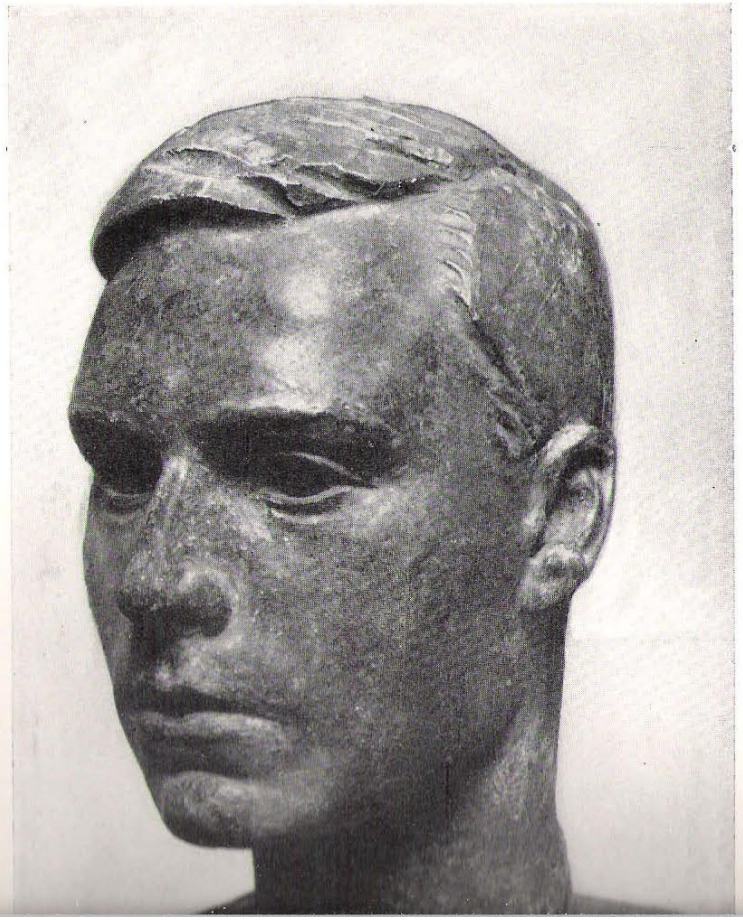


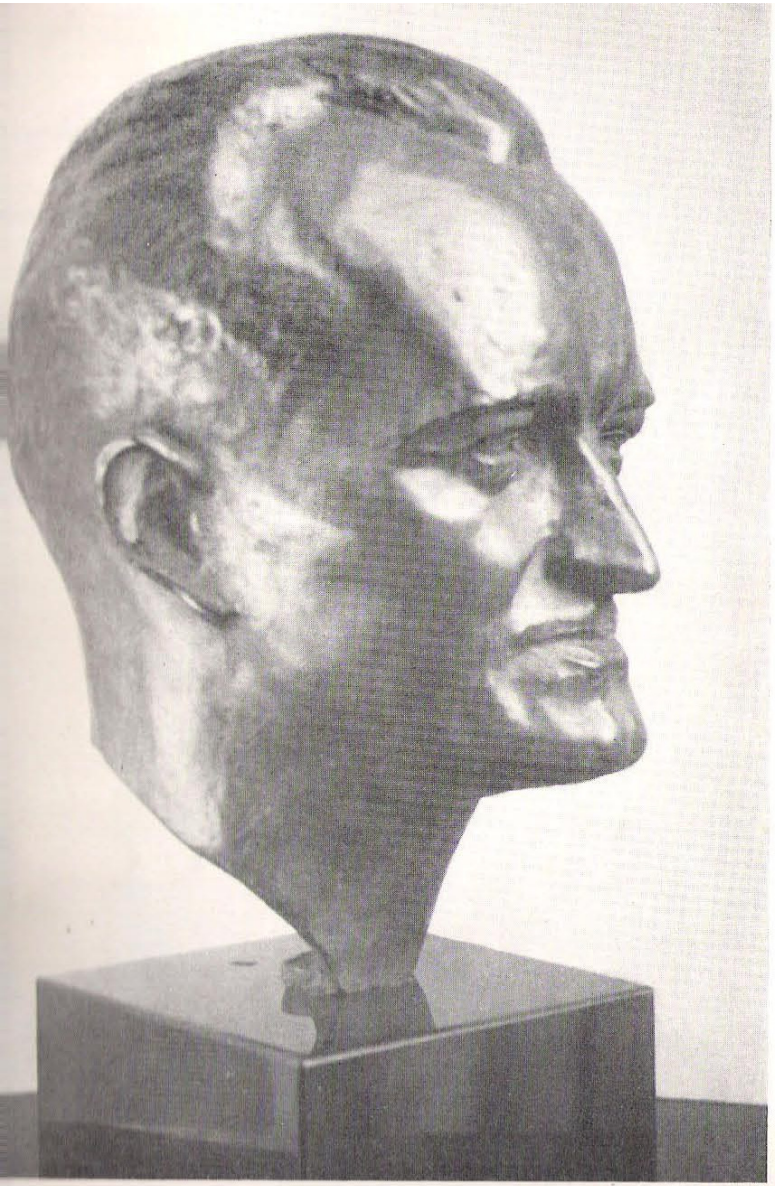
"Henri," Municipal Museum of Amsterdam, Holland.
More than just a portrait, a highly poetical interpretation of candid youth.

Leplae, Charles: "Marinette," Museum of Fine Arts, Liége, Belgium.
Is there a more beautiful landscape than a sensitive human face.

Debonnaires, Fernand (1900-): **Head of the Ingenue.**
Elegance without weakness, mark Debonnaires' female figures.

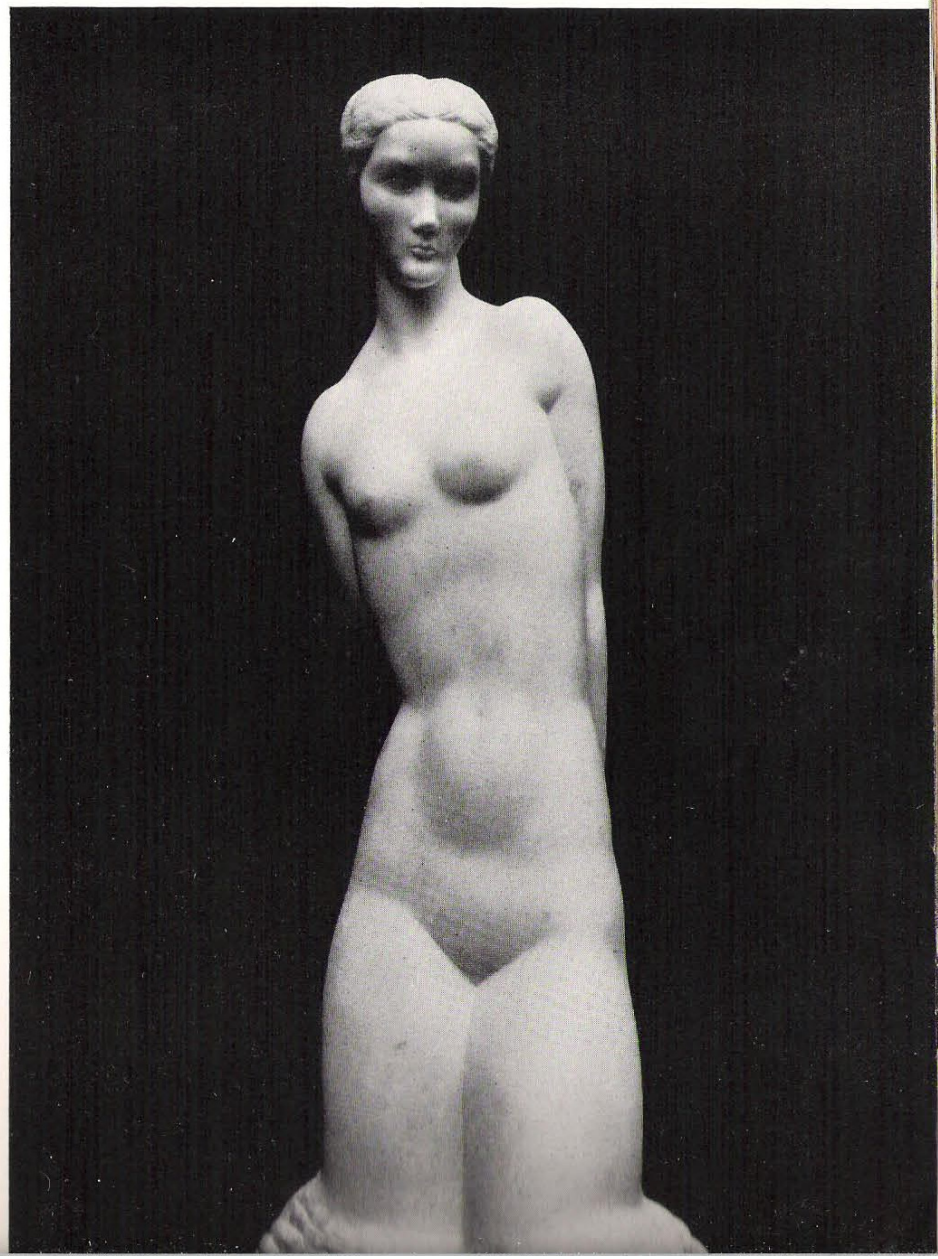
Debonnaires, Fernand: Selfportrait.
The challenge of representing one's own features was taken up and successfully met.



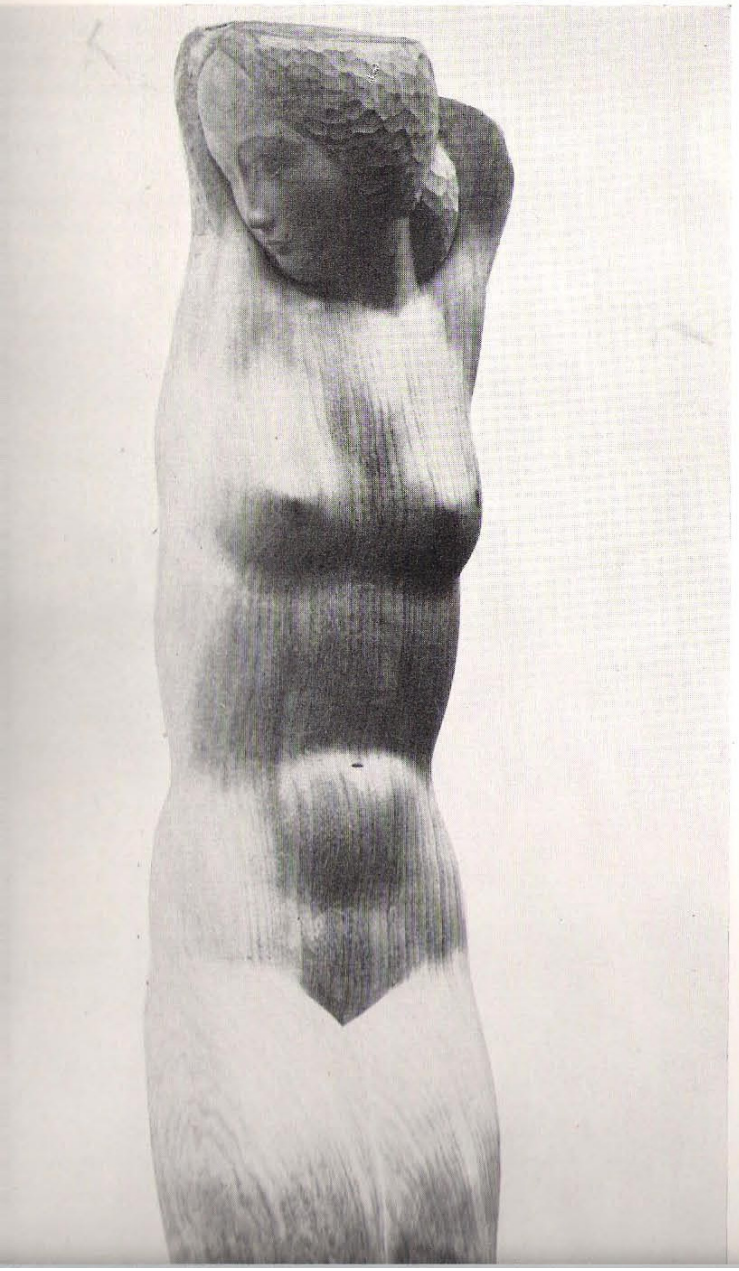


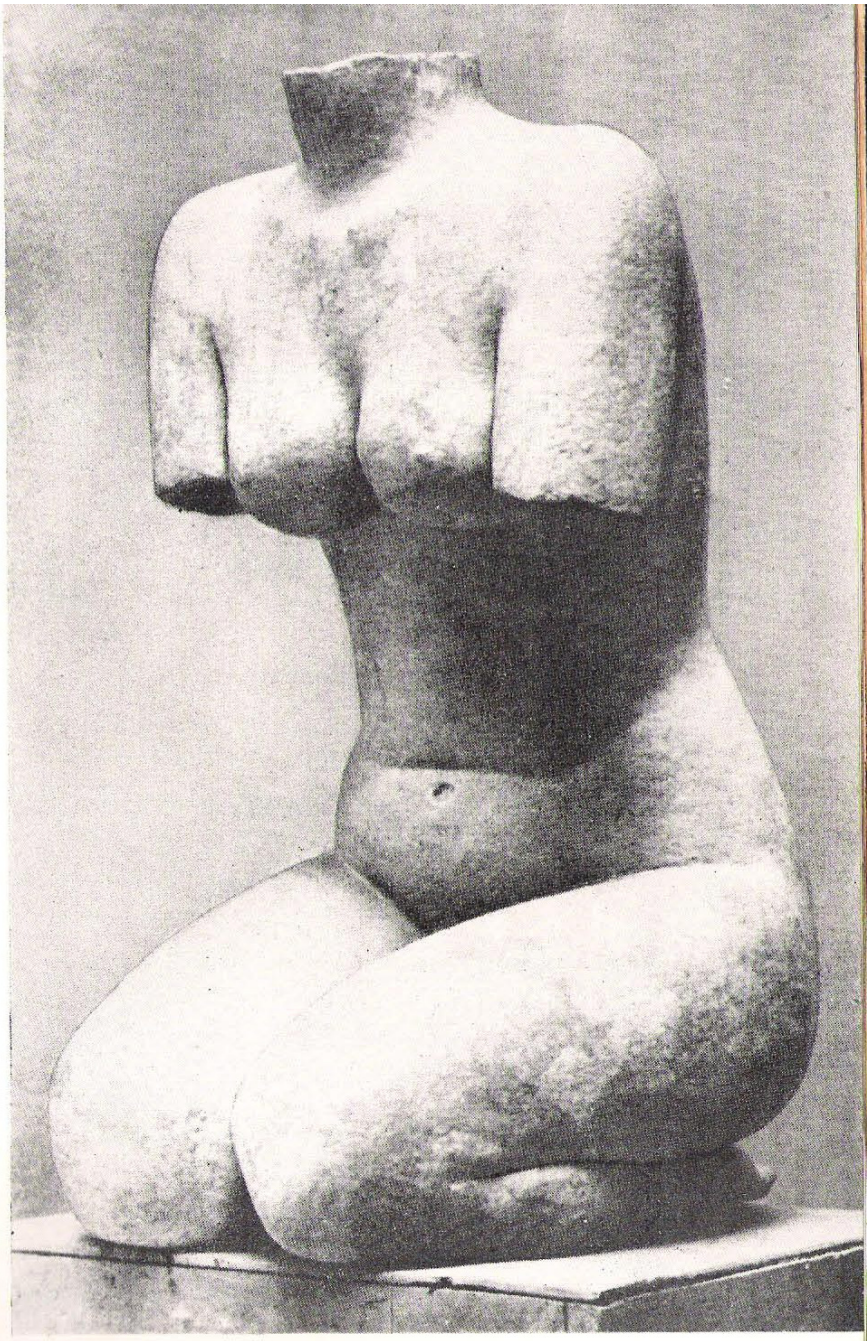
Vleeshouwers, Lode (1899-): **Portrait,** Private collection, Antwerp. A successful portraitist, Vleeshouwers is better known for his monumental sculptures of fantastic size at the Orval abbey.

Kreitz, Willy (1903-): **Adolescence,** Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. Deviating frankly from realism, Kreitz attains a powerful effect without sacrificing the values of human sentiment.



Kreitz, Willy: Torso, Private collection, Brussels.
Excellent use is made of the material which imposes strict limitations.





De Winne, Robert: Torso, Private collection.
One of Belgium's youngest sculptors continues a great tradition.

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